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Experiencing Vulnerability as a Weakness or Strength

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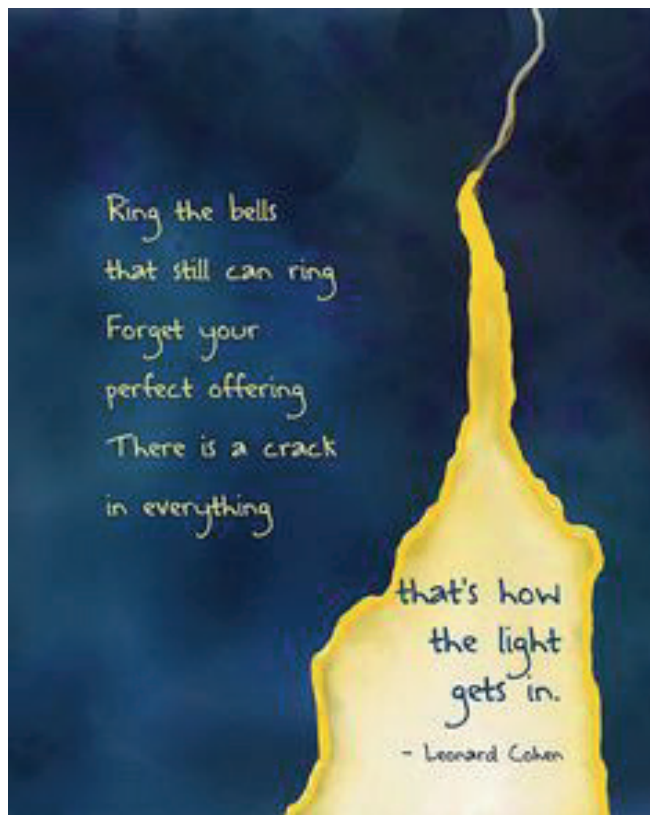
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EXPERIENCING VULNERABILITY AS A WEAKNESS OR STRENGTH: A PROCESS-MODEL OF LEADER VULNERABILITY

Johannes S.N. Claeys



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Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan Tilburg University op gezag van de rector magnificus,
prof. dr. E.H.L. Aarts, in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college voor
promoties aangewezen commissie in de Ruth First zaal van de Universiteit op

dinsdag 10 oktober 2017 om 14.00 uur

door

Johannes Simonne Noël Claeys

geboren op 16 augustus 1981 te Brugge, België

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Prof.dr. M. van Vugt

Prof.dr. L. Van Liedekerke

Prof.dr. D. Pollefeyt

Dr. F.H. Gerpott

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in

L. Cohen

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Onrustig is mijn hart tot het rust in u (naar Augustinus, Confessiones)

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ABSTRACT

While previous authors have advocated for the impact and thus relevance of leader vulnerability (i.e., the potential to be harmed) in the workplace, this topic lacks independent investigation. To explore this relatively new topic, this study takes an inductive, qualitative approach to better understand the process by which leader vulnerability unfolds. Results from 46 semi-structured interviews indicate that one's potential to be harmed can move from unacknowledged to felt by the actor, displayed to others and ultimately perceived by followers. Throughout these stages vulnerability is subject to inflation such that moving from one stage to the next increases the subjective potential to be harmed. These distinctions help understand the key factors (e.g., emotional regulation, political skills, psychological safety, self-awareness, competence, and role awareness) that influence the internal dynamics related to leader vulnerability. More precise, these contingencies have the potential to deflate the subjective vulnerability and transform its experience to acceptable levels of risk or potential harm. This process-model helps shed more light on whether and why leader vulnerability is a strength or a weakness in the workplace and, more generally, highlights a vulnerability paradox where a work environment that incites vulnerability also creates norms against vulnerability displays.

Keywords: vulnerability, qualitative, leader, process-model

**A PROCESS-MODEL OF LEADER VULNERABILITY:
FROM UNRECOGNIZED TO FELT, DISPLAYED AND PERCEIVED
VULNERABILITY.**

In our experience, when an alpha admits he is afraid or asks for help, the impact on his team is profoundly positive. So it is a key milestone when an alpha expresses a fear or exposes a vulnerability.

Paradoxical as it may sound, when a leader admits he's wrong and needs to change, he comes across as more confident and courageous than when he insists he's right

K. Ludeman & E. Erlandson, HBR, 2004.

The current work environment has been characterized as highly competitive (Netessine & Yakubovich, 2012). While competition may be necessary for company survival, sustained competition can also install a mindset of perfectionism (Dweck, 2007): standards become so high that they are difficult, sometime impossible, to live up to them. In such a work environment, individuals are more vulnerable (defined here as the potential to be harmed) when making mistakes, admitting lack of knowledge, or, more generally, revealing weaknesses, because those behaviors do not align with the high performance expectations of their work environment. This creates a paradoxical situation where the higher the performance standards, the more likely that employees are vulnerable but the less likely that this vulnerability will be expressed (Kish-Gephart et al., 2007; 2009; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith; 2015).

In other words, the current work environment both breeds and discourages vulnerability at the same time. In this dissertation, we want to address this paradox and develop a better understanding of the nature of vulnerability in the workplace as well as its positive and negative effects.

Vulnerability has been mentioned in a variety of publications, most notably those on trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1997) and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). Whereas these publications have treated vulnerability as a characteristic of a dyadic relationship (i.e., trust as the willingness to be vulnerable to another) or team environment (i.e., team psychological safety as the willingness to be vulnerable on one's team), these literatures have insufficiently considered vulnerability outside of these relational bounds, as an independent and focal topic of investigation. For instance, individuals can make themselves vulnerable pro-actively, without guarantees in terms of trust and psychological safety, thus instigating (rather than needing) dyadic trust or team psychological safety. In other words, they have yet to consider how instances of displayed vulnerability by individuals drive shared norms around vulnerability in relationships or in groups. A notable exception to this is literature on authenticity (Roberts et al., 2009), and authentic leadership in particular (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) where displayed vulnerability was suggested as a subcomponent of revealing one's authentic self. Revealing one's vulnerabilities may, however, also be an impression management tactic, for instance through supplication of one's weaknesses may one attempt to engender the favor of others (Roberts, 2005). In other words, vulnerability can be displayed but not necessarily felt. Finally, the above literature seems to suggest mostly positive outcomes of vulnerability, however more seminal research in personality states that some domains of one's personality (i.e., neuroticism) can instigate feelings or displays of vulnerability, and lacking this emotional stability may not always benefit the individual (Costa & McCrae, 1998).

The above suggests that the topic of vulnerability received substantial but fragmented attention. Previous research (e.g. trust, authenticity, psychological safety, neuroticism) offers a specific manifestation of the broader concept of vulnerability, like pieces of a puzzle are contributing to a bigger picture. Getting the bigger picture requires research that takes vulnerability as a focal topic. Linking the different pieces of the vulnerability-puzzle may also shed more light on the paradoxical nature of vulnerability in a competitive workplace, where vulnerability is both fed and discouraged simultaneously. Only through a process-oriented perspective where vulnerability is not just viewed as a general personality-trait, as an end state (as in trust or psychological safety) or as a starting point (as in the authenticity literature) will we get a fine-grained understanding of how vulnerability unfolds over time. Figure 1 provides an overview of the model for this study, derived from an inductive qualitative research using grounded theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967, Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Figure 1 highlights the different subcomponents of vulnerability (unrecognized, felt, displayed, and perceived) that may lead to positive or negative work-related outcomes.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

This study contributes to prior research by highlighting the (1) multi-faceted, (2) dynamic, and (3) complex nature of leader vulnerability. Firstly, in differentiating between the manifestations of vulnerability in Figure 1 (i.e., unrecognized, felt, displayed and perceived vulnerability), we go beyond prior work that has looked at only one or more of these sub facets. When disregarding the multi-faceted nature of leader vulnerability, prior work has failed to elucidate the bigger picture of leader vulnerability or, more precisely, has failed to see how different manifestations are interlinked and why it is important to study them together.

Secondly, we shed more light on the dynamic nature of leader vulnerability. Specifically, in developing a process-model we find how vulnerability can rise, increase, decline and sometimes even cease to exist under influence of certain key contingencies. This is important as this dynamic representation helps understand the vulnerability paradox where a competitive work environment both feeds vulnerability and installs norms against allowing such vulnerability. Specifically, our model suggests that under such normative pressures against vulnerability, instances of vulnerability can flare up in that, when left unchecked, can quickly cascade from one stage to the next, thus undermining its effectiveness in influencing followers.

Thirdly, we highlight the complexity of leader vulnerability in terms of influencing leader effectiveness. Whereas prior work has discussed vulnerability rather positively (Brown, 2012), our work provides a more nuanced perspective that suggest that vulnerability will only accrue these positive effects under a set of contingences. In essence, our model suggests that – when left unchecked- vulnerability will be as destructive as the norms of its competitive environment suggest that it will be. However, when transformed, vulnerability has the chance to make a relatively rare and positive difference for leaders in their efforts to influence followers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The word vulnerability originates from the Latin word *vulnus*, meaning wound (Merriam Webster), or more broadly, the possibility of harm. Irrespective of the context in which vulnerability is created, the concept of vulnerability is characterized by a twofold structure: someone is vulnerable to something or someone else. Awareness of the duplex nature of vulnerability is crucial to understand the dynamics of vulnerability: (i.e., the rise, increase, decrease and disappearance of potential harm). There are two sides to vulnerability: either one becomes vulnerable by an increased external threat or by a decreased capacity to protect or defend oneself. In other words, one becomes vulnerable if there is imbalance between defensive capacity and offensive potential. In both ways, the likelihood of harm consequently increases. This dual nature of vulnerability aligns with the common, medical and juridical interpretation of vulnerability. For example, described in a medical context as “susceptibility to injury or disease” (Merriam Webster Clinical Dictionary), vulnerability can focus on the external harm (e.g., the flu) or the people that are more susceptible to harm by a weaker auto immune system (e.g., aging). Further, vulnerability is applicable at an individual level (e.g. employee), a collective level (e.g., minorities, countries, organizations) but also to systems or processes (e.g., a vulnerable market, a vulnerable data management system). In this study, the focal referents are leaders in the workplace and the notion of vulnerability is used in a neutral and non-normative way, meaning that it could have beneficial as well as detrimental outcomes.

Vulnerability is by no means a new concept in management science. Firstly, authentic leadership suggests displayed vulnerability as a pro-active choice by leaders, while secondly, the same vulnerability will emerge in the risk taking in relations as an outcome of trust. Within trust, the displayed vulnerability will unfold itself within a dyadic relations, compared to psychological safety where vulnerability is thirdly a possible characteristic of a group or an organizational climate. Finally, with vulnerability as a facet of neuroticism, one of the ‘big five

factors', we realize that personality research is pointing towards a more stable and rather negative interpretation of vulnerability (i.e., being emotionally unstable). With its primary focus on experienced, negative and distressing emotions (felt vulnerability) and its behavioral traits (displayed vulnerability), personality research suggests a particular view on vulnerability. In the same way, authenticity, trust and psychological safety reveal essential manifestations of vulnerability (displayed vulnerability), but they also fail to grasp the entire vulnerability taxonomy or dynamics. After generally comparing leader vulnerability with respectively trust, authenticity, psychological safety and personality measures, we will now focus on the details of this comparison.

Trust and Vulnerability

Initially, trust seemed to be the most logical option to explore the notion of vulnerability. It is conventional to include vulnerability in trust definitions and situations. However, the standardized inclusion of vulnerability in trust is by no means followed by an in depth investigation of the concept of vulnerability. On the contrary, perhaps because the presence of vulnerability is so commonly accepted within trust, the literature might overlook its relevance and distinctiveness.

There are four elements in favor of starting the exploration on vulnerability with trust. Firstly, we see that the notion of vulnerability was already included in the early trust conceptualizations (Zand, 1972; Boss, 1978). Secondly, it is often mentioned in more recent trust-descriptions (see table 1) and became therefore an element of convergence regarding the core trust elements (Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Lewicki et al., 2006; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). Thirdly, the role of vulnerability as a necessary constituent of trust can be illustrated with its appearance in the cross-disciplinary definition of trust as the willingness to make one vulnerable to another party (Rousseau et al., 1998). Finally, one of the few articles that have a central focus on vulnerability, is situated within trust (i.e. Lapidot et al., 2007).

Based upon an analysis of the trust-literature, we understood that vulnerability is a basic ingredient of high quality, trusting relationships. Yet, the existing research leaves crucial questions unanswered. In the following paragraphs, we will capture the main contributions of trust to the notion of vulnerability and at the same time detect opportunities for further, in-depth investigation.

When we defined vulnerability as potential harm, we align with the trust-interpretation. Within trust literature vulnerability is framed as risk, present in all behavioral trust-situations (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Kee & Knox, 1970). This presence of risk is primarily connected with the idea that an element (e.g., a person, an object, a service, an ideal) has value or is in need of care, respect or attention (Baier, 1985). Within trust, vulnerability implies some kind of “exposure” (Zand, 1972, p. 231) or uncontrollability, which in turns opens the door to “adverse outcomes” (Das & Teng, p. 104), more precisely the condition “that something of importance can be lost” (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712) or damaged. According to the trust-literature, these expressions of vulnerability can be summarized by the notion of risk taking: “making oneself vulnerable is taking risks” (Mayer et al., p. 712). Our notion of vulnerability as ‘potential to be harmed’ resonates with the conceptualization of vulnerability as risky behavior. We pointed out before that the twofold nature of vulnerability has to be understood by the asymmetry between the external threat (outward dimension), and present defense (inward dimension). When comparing this to the trust-conceptualization, we could reconnect the internal/external dimensions with the absence of specific, protective behavior (e.g., self-protective actions like monitoring or controlling) or the dependence on potentially harmful behavior from others. Both internal and external elements accompanying the trustor create the possibility of harm. Within trust, vulnerability turns into actual harm in cases of integrity-based violations (e.g., lying, cheating) or competence-based violations (e.g., not completing the

project before the promised deadline due to an inadequate skillset, Ferrin et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2004, 2006).

Because the content of the vulnerability remains rather unclear and divers within trust, this research could support the trust research by identifying and clarifying different vulnerability manifestations, in this case related to leader vulnerability. Although the trust literature underlines the importance of vulnerability, the nature and the process of vulnerability often remains unspecified: “The specific nature of the vulnerability depends on the situation as well as on the trust referent, because the nature of one’s vulnerability to various parties differs” (Mayer & Davis, 2005, p. 874). Although trust and vulnerability are frequently and intimately connected, the relationship between vulnerability and trust is far from clear. What constitutes vulnerability, except from being behavioral, revealing something of importance and therefore engendering a certain amount of risk? Can we cluster and at the same time differentiate between different manifestations of vulnerability? There are two major contributions to the identification of vulnerability within trust. We have Mayer and Davis (2005) and Gillespie (2003) who categorize the behavioral trust/behavioral vulnerability. Mayer and Davis (2005) distinguish active and passive ways of being vulnerable. In an active way, a person becomes vulnerable by active behavior (e.g., sharing sensitive information), while an employee can also accept vulnerability by renouncing self-protective behavior (e.g., monitoring). In a similar way, Gillespie (2003, 2004) separates reliance-related behaviors (e.g., reducing control and monitoring, reducing one’s autonomy in resources, decisions and responsibilities and transfer it to a subordinate, superior or colleague) from active disclosure of sensitive information. The nature of the shared knowledge in disclosure-based trust can either be professional (e.g., admitting to a superior having made a mistake in a project with an important client) as well as personal (e.g., sharing sensitive information about one’s family). The twofold, behavioral conceptualization draws on the earlier work of Zand (1972) and offers a broad perspective on

the risk and thus the vulnerability that has been developed in a trust-context. However, we believe that these distinctions are calling for a deeper exploration and classification of vulnerability. What is exactly constituting “the thing of importance that can be lost” (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712)? The existing classification (i.e., active, passive, reliance-based trust and disclosure-based trust) within behavioral trust gives a rough indication, but this research is on the lookout for a more fine-grained and dynamic understanding of the concept vulnerability.

The second, central contribution of trust on vulnerability is the distinction between trusting intentions and trusting behavior (McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 1998), where the latter is defined as vulnerability (Colquit et al., 2007; Mayer & Gavin, 2005; Mayer et al., 1995). Most authors separate the intention to become vulnerable (i.e. “the willingness to be vulnerable”) from vulnerable behavior (i.e., actually assuming vulnerability), with in between some kind of calculus or risk assessment. So, not every “willingness to be vulnerable” ends up by actual vulnerability. However, this trust-approach has the risk to overlook the vulnerability that is not behavioral. Further, the literature is not always clear whether vulnerability proceeds or follows trust. The Mayer et al. (1995) definition, which influenced the direction of the current trust-research (Gillespie & Mann, 2004), interprets actual vulnerability as an outcome of trust. However, the same Mayer et al. (1995, p. 71) states “that it is not clear whether risk is an antecedent to trust, is trust, or is an outcome of trust.” In the same way Luhmann (1998, p. 97) is convinced that trust “presupposes a situation of risk. If there is no risk, the trustor would not have a chance to benefit from the advantages of the trusting behavior. Moorman et al. (1992, p. 315) argues in the same way that vulnerability is necessary for trust, otherwise the outcomes are inconsequential for the trustor. So, even if the default position views vulnerability as an outcome of trust, at the same time it is seen as an opportunity or condition in which trust can develop (Hosmer, 1995; Korsgaard et al., 2002; Lewis & Weigert, 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). While we acknowledge that risk and vulnerability are hardly treated distinctively within trust,

we could state that in a similar way, some researchers see vulnerability as an antecedent for trust. Dirks (2000) and Lau and Liden (2008) highlight that existing vulnerability increases the magnitude of trusting effects. Further, Lapidot et al. (2007) state that the situational variation of low and high vulnerability of the follower explains the perceived trustworthiness of the leader by the follower, where a high vulnerability is characterized by a heightened vigilance for potential trust erosions. Finally, when Gillespie and Mann (2007) look into the leadership practices, they label specific leadership behavior as vulnerable behavior, which in turns influences followers' trust in the leader. They found that sharing common values with team members, consultative decision-making, communicating and modelling a collective, value-driven vision had the greatest impact on followers trust in leaders. Can one however, as Gillespie and Mann (2007, p. 602), equate "openly communicating ideas, vision and values, and delegating power and responsibility to team members" that easily to leader vulnerability? We believe that that some leadership behavior could stimulate trust in leader, but we are not convinced that every vulnerable leader behavior is developed in a trust-relation. Not every vulnerable behavior is driven by the expectation that the other party is trustworthy, which is another significant element of trust conceptualization of vulnerability. Nor is every vulnerability-manifestation per definition developed in a dyadic, relational context. We can also become vulnerable by the norms, standards and values of the workplace, and this invisible yet omnipresent vulnerability is not connected with the presence or absence of trust in specific persons.

To conclude, it has been clearly demonstrated that trust would be a logical and legitimate candidate to start an in depth investigation on the notion of vulnerability. While we've acknowledged the importance of the trust-research for the exploration on vulnerability, we've pointed out that a trust-lens on vulnerability only selects a very specific manifestation of vulnerability. More specific, following the trust-research, we might overlook the pro-active

reason to engage in vulnerable behavior or miss the vulnerability that is not trust-driven, the vulnerability emerging outside a dyadic relation, developed without the positive expectation of beneficial reciprocation and aside from a behavioral manifestation.

Authenticity and Vulnerability

Within literature on authenticity, vulnerability is present on an individual level. Similar to vulnerability, authenticity can be felt, displayed and perceived (cfr. *infra*), while those manifestations are not necessarily aligned. What we label as displayed vulnerability, could reside in expressing one's true self. "In particular, through revealing vulnerability, it is suggested that followers can more readily identify with leaders, resulting in more positive and influential relationships between leaders and followers" (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010, p. 22). More specifically, the displayed vulnerability could relate to more specific dimensions like relational transparency. "Transparent leaders {...} admit their weaknesses and expose their vulnerability" (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 401). This relational transparency stimulates openness and self-disclosure, including discussing one's vulnerabilities (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Avolio et al., 2004).

Psychological Safety and Vulnerability

As the paradox explained that vulnerability thrives in a "Darwinian workplace" (Netessine & Yakubovich, 2012), we expect that kind of organizational environment to be low on psychological safety. Our conceptualization of vulnerability identified potential harm originating from the imbalance between internal defense and external threat. In a similar way psychological safety, implies interpersonal risk taking, believing that one will not be rejected for that risky action (Edmondson, 1999). Those risky and thus potential harmful actions are identified as "seeking feedback, discussing errors, seeking information and feedback from customers and others" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 357). As Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) state, building psychological safety can be a double-edged sword for leaders. On the one hand,

there are the favorable outcomes on learning, but on the other hand, the leader must feel comfortable allowing dissent, respecting feedback that is not wanted or expected and finally resist the temptation of using the power connected with his or her function. We will see in the next chapters whether those vulnerable leader behaviors and attitudes are in line with the narratives of our respondents.

Neuroticism and Vulnerability

While trust, authenticity and psychological safety describe a rather voluntary (i.e., self-chosen) and transient vulnerability, personality-research will point out the more stable manifestations of vulnerability. To the best of our knowledge, vulnerability is explicitly mentioned in the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI, Costa & McCrae, 1985) and especially in the more recent Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R, Costa & McCrae, 1992). In line with the commonly accepted idea that there are five distinctive and robust dimensions ("the big five") of personality (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990), the NEO-PI-R assesses personality based upon 5 domains or factors, each defined by 6 lower order facets. In our case, the relevant domain scale is neuroticism. It is one of the most pervasive factors across personality measures (Costa & McCrae, 1988; Judge et al., 1999) and generally referring to individuals who are lacking the capacity of positive psychological adjustment and are in a chronic condition of distress-proneness and emotional instability (Costa & McCrae, 1987). According to Costa and McCrae (1995) vulnerability is, together with anxiety and depression, one of the purest markers of neuroticism. A high vulnerability-score is indicating a general susceptibility to stress, with associated, behavioral and cognitive characteristics like easily getting overwhelmed by events and emotion, easily panicking, not been able to make up one's mind etc. (Costa & McCrae, 1995).

Existing Literature and Research Ambition

Going through the literature on vulnerability, what we defined as the potential to be harmed, we've seen particular and fragmented interpretations of the broader concept of vulnerability that we envision. Like individual pieces of the puzzle, they are relevant and even necessary, but they lack the broader, integrative perspective. We believe that psychological safety is essentially connected with feeling safe and accepted, so more related to (low) felt vulnerability. Whereas trust and authenticity will highlight more visible manifestations of vulnerability, vulnerability within personality research will be more connected to more inward elements like emotional stability, stress and coping mechanisms. Vulnerability, as an element of a personality-dimension IV (i.e., neuroticism) also points to more stable manifestations of vulnerability, brings in contextual elements (i.e. not every person has the same capacity to deal effectively with experiences of vulnerability) and warns for a too positive view on vulnerability. It would be incorrect to equate neuroticism and by consequence vulnerability to psychiatric disorders (Costa & McCrae, 1987), but other labels for the fourth dimension like anxiety (Catell, 1957), negative emotionality (Tellegen, 1985) and negative affectivity (Watson & Clark, 1984) prohibit us to see vulnerability only as a good thing, neglecting the potential costs and burden.

Although existing scholarly writing lacks systematic focus on the topic of vulnerability, we believe that leaders and organizations are triggered to understand and deal with the previously mentioned vulnerability paradox. This could explain the increased (practitioner-oriented) interest for the topic of vulnerability (Farson and Keyes, 2002; Brown, 2012; Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, & Senge, 2007; DeLong & DeLong, 2011), however this attention is, to our knowledge, not yet backed up with a research in micro-OB with vulnerability as a central

lens. To conclude, our research ambition focuses on the clarification of leader vulnerability, framing it as a taxonomy and as a process.

METHOD

The literature review made clear that vulnerability is often a byproduct of something else (e.g., an antecedent, outcome etc.) and therefore a complete understanding eludes us. There is, to the best of our knowledge, not much research that takes leader vulnerability as a focal topic. We believe that an inductive, qualitative approach is best suited to address the scarcity on the topic of vulnerability within the existing literature.

We've used an inductive approach with the intention to capture the essential manifestations and dynamics of leader vulnerability. More specifically, we designed a qualitative study to obtain an in-depth understanding of leader vulnerability: how is it developed, manifested and experienced by leaders in the workplace. An inductive study has the best chances in supplying empirical data for this research ambition. Otherwise said, it can be argued that a qualitative approach has the best credentials to tap into these delicate, complex and sometimes uncomfortable experiences that accompany vulnerable leadership. It is only through what Geertz (1973) and Denzin (1989, p. 83) call "thick description" that we will detect how vulnerability is "lived", understood and interpreted by leaders in the workplace. Listening to the narratives of the respondents, we can hear how they make sense out of this combination of emotions, thought, behaviors or perceptions that accompany the leader vulnerability (Weick, 1995). During the interview, the respondent makes a narrative in the moment. Per definition, a narrative connects different elements of the experience in a coherent view, by processes of interpretation (Polkinghorne, 1988). Those connections are important for a process oriented model on leader vulnerability. We built on their categorization in order to develop a baseline for a vulnerability taxonomy. If we compare the different narratives, we are able to detect

patterns. Consequently, we can identify the marking points in their reported vulnerability dynamics. Based upon the identification of those essential markers, we can clarify in which tasks leaders are engaged if they want to develop a strategic and balanced leader vulnerability.

Data and Procedure

Our semi-structured interview employed an interview guide (King, 1994) to provide a common framework for interpretation afterwards (Pettigrew, 1979, Isabella, 1999). In order to maximize the effectivity of the interview, we relied on the suggestions of Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) for the design and operationalization. We've conducted preliminary interviews in March 2014 in the US to test and modify the clarity of the questions in the research protocol. The data collection was organized on two occasions (summer 2014 and winter 2014-2015), and the build-up of the interview and the nature of the questions evolved during the different waves of interviews. While the first data collection had an exploratory purpose, using open-ended questions (how would you describe your vulnerability as a leader in the work place?), the second dataset focused on the most recent events in which one has displayed vulnerable behavior (when was the last time you displayed vulnerable behavior in the workplace?), the outcomes, the emotional experience accompanying that behavior and the intermediary actions that influenced the self-evaluated outcome of the vulnerable behavior. By focusing on recent events, we followed Eisenhardt and Graebner's (2007) advice to enhance accuracy by asking for recent, focal events.

For this research, we relied on 165 single spaced pages of transcribed verbatim, hand written field notes to complement the transcripts with non-verbal information and off-record information, about 200 pages of analytic memos. Other accessed data relates to the organization we visited and were found on websites or in brochures. They were used as preparation for the interview or as a basis for the socio-demographic identification of the respondent or his organization.

Sampling Strategy and Description

Within this study, our sampling strategy had an iterative design: the selection of the samples was guided by the theoretical relevance of new respondents in the light of emerging insights or categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 49). This approach is labeled by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014, p. 34) as “conceptually driven sequential sampling”. The iterative nature is also inherent to the grounded theory approach where initial, exploratory sampling (Charmaz, 2015) is followed by theoretical sampling. To illustrate this process, we refer firstly to the item of psychological safety. In the first data collection, psychological safety was almost absent. The first wave comprised of CEO’s of non-stock market listed, small and medium-sized enterprises, who mostly owned the company. Those respondents were almost completely autonomous in crafting their leadership behavior, including the display of vulnerability with little fear for retaliation, back-firing or embarrassment. When switching to line functions in health care, mostly located in lower management positions, we found out that psychological safety increased significantly in importance. Secondly, we’ve adapted the selection of the organizational size, because respondents stated that their display of vulnerability would not have been possible within large scale companies (e.g. respondent 12). Basic overview of sample characteristics can be found in the appendix section. Further information available upon request.

While our sampling strategy has been adjusted throughout the data collection and analysis, we also maintained some initial strategies. Firstly, we’ve chosen respondents in a leadership position. Further elaborating on the vulnerability-paradox in the workplace in general, the focus on vulnerable leaders might offer a zoom on the processes underlying this paradox. Displaying or even acknowledging vulnerability (e.g. admitting failures) will be even harder for those in a leadership position in this competitive or perfectionistic environments. Or as Finkelstein (2003, p. 179), who investigated over 50 major corporate failures, states:

“Ironically enough, the higher people are in the management hierarchy, the more they tend to supplement their perfectionism with blanket excuses, with CEOs usually being the worst of all”. Secondly, we’ve selected a balanced mixture of age and tenure. While not necessary selected for means of generalizability, we’ve expected that the underlying lack of experience could reinforce feelings or display of vulnerability. Apparently, moving to a new position or adapting to a new environment makes one often feel vulnerable (Ibarra, 2015). Thirdly, we followed Eisenhardt (1989, p. 537) that replicating or modifying the emergent theory is best served by a theoretical sampling strategy where cases and respondents are selected based upon their potential to make the emerging theoretical framework “transparently observable”. Identifying and selecting contrasting or polar contexts is an example of theoretical sampling where the researcher maximize the possibility of acquiring contrasting data patterns. At the same time, detecting overarching features within diverging settings is a stepping stone for generalizable constructs (Kahn, 1990). In this perspective, we proceeded with a double sampling strategy. The first, contrasting sampling strategy includes opposing *contexts*. We first selected professions, organizations and departments within organizations we expected to be less open or inclined to develop vulnerable leader behavior (engineering, IT, production). The other sample consists of professions, organizations and departments within organizations that are expected to develop a higher tolerance for leader vulnerability. We focused largely on health care (hospitals, elderly care). The usefulness of this strategy, is highlighted by the fact that on the one hand, the first and second data collection comprised an equal amount of vulnerable behavior (34 versus respectively 39 displays) and most of the causes, behaviors and outcomes of vulnerability are comparable. The presence and rise of vulnerability is thus not connected to a specific field (e.g. health care). Even if in the first dataset only one respondent mentions the display of emotions and the second dataset in health care showed 8 cases, this is no contradiction to the argument that vulnerability is a construct present in several contexts. Just

as respondent 4 of dataset 1 stated that the display of emotions can only be allowed in and for professional causes (e.g. unexpected setbacks, project failure), we can see that showing emotions in a health care environment is often unavoidable and perhaps a mere illustration of one's professionalism or work ethos. One head nurse had over 30 deceased patients in a short time, while another had assisted in the euthanasia of a patient. Another head nurse told the story of boy, who had the age of her own son, who came to visit his mother after her suicide attempt. For head nurses, under the right circumstances, at the right time, in a specific way, displaying emotions can rather be an illustration of professional behavior than an exception to it. The second, contrasting sampling strategy differentiates *top management from lower management*. As mentioned before, we started interviewing 20 CEO's while in the second wave we focused more on first-line management. This strategy brought to light that vulnerability is intimately connected with power, since the second data set guided us to narratives comprising elements of psychological safety and voice.

Analysis

Our analysis was both linear, passing from first cycle coding to second cycle coding (Saldana, 2013) as circular, constantly revising and comparing earlier codes, constantly itinerating between the data and the emerging theory, as extensively documented in our analytic memo's. First cycle coding consisted of zooming in on the data whether called microanalysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015 p. 71) or initial coding (Charmaz, 2014), and of zooming out on the data, applying structural coding (Guest et al., 2012; Namey et al., 2008; MacQueen et al., 2008; Saldana, 2013). The structural coding groups and labels larger segments of data, resulting in improved access to data and installing structure and overview. The structural coding generates an overview that counterbalancing the in-depth focus obtained via microanalysis.

Within the grounded theory approach, sampling strategy, data collection, data analysis and emerging, theoretical development are intimately connected. Through the research process,

we can identify 2 major cycles of data collection, data analysis and generation of theory. Each cycle builds on the intermediary results of the previous one, but there is “a delimiting of the theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 110). This process is according to Glaser and Strauss (1967) twofold: it solidifies the emerging theory until it reaches theoretical saturation and it reduces the amount of interrelated categories.

Using this process of constant comparison, the analysis led to two major theoretical contributions: on the one hand, a rather static framework of vulnerable leader components unfolded itself and crystallized in a vulnerability taxonomy. On the other hand, the analysis opened the way for more dynamic interpretation of the leader vulnerability and culminated in leader vulnerability interpreted as a process.

FINDINGS

Definition

We’ve defined vulnerability earlier as the possibility of harm, due to the increased external threat, or to the diminished internal capacity to defend oneself. Based upon the qualitative coding of responses to the question “What does it mean to be vulnerable in the workplace?”, we refine the working definition of vulnerability as:

A contextual and dynamic possibility of being harmed, due to the imbalance between the internal capacity to defend oneself and an external threat, that can be felt, displayed, perceived or remain unacknowledged.

This broad definition includes firstly the core manifestations of vulnerability, which in turn allows us to include different forms of vulnerability: manifestations originating from the self or caused by others, intentional displays as well as non-realized manifestations, self-perceptions and perceptions by others, behavioral manifestations and inner processes.

Secondly, the definition refers to the dual nature of vulnerability. That means that on the one hand, we interpret vulnerability as potential harm as a result of the reduced capacity to protect. Intentionally limiting one's defensive capacity has a broad spectrum of options: absence of control, avoidance of offensives strategies, reduced display of status and authority etc. On the other hand, an incline in external threat, a heightened external hostility also results in an increased susceptibility for potential harm, if the defense capacity is not augmented in the same way. The dual nature of the general concept of vulnerability allows us to differentiate between threat and (potential) harm. Persons can encounter threats, but that does not necessarily mean that they are vulnerable. The potential to be harmed could still be absent, since the hostility is insignificant or the protection is maximized. We summarize the dual nature of vulnerability using a metaphor of an Italian respondent of the first wave. Whether we focus on the arms of the other (external threat) or the limitations of the own body armor (diminished capacity to protect), in both elements resides a heightened potential of harm or a higher probability of getting wounded (vulnus). Or in the words of the Italian CEO:

“From my point of view, being vulnerable means not having an armor. I once read a book about the history of Rome, about the gladiators. They trained them to go for the most vulnerable parts of the enemy. What are those vulnerable parts? The parts that are not protected by the armor. It's there that you are vulnerable. {...}. What does that mean? Well, think about the gladiators. The vulnerable parts do exist and the enemy trains just to reach for those points. So, to answer your question, I say, Yes, we're all vulnerable, so it is up to us to wear the most protective armor in order not getting exposed to the enemy. {...}. The enemy is the market, the competition, the person that are below you in the same company and might want to steal your position”.

Thirdly, the dynamic element in the definition refers to the (respondents perceptions on the) fluctuations in the size or volume of the vulnerability, where a higher vulnerability is materialized by the increase of potential harm. As we will see, transient or temporary fluctuations of leader vulnerability also includes the emergence, fading and dissolution of vulnerability.

Fourthly, we also acknowledge more stable elements of vulnerability, referring to the contextual elements that influence the vulnerability. Specific characteristics or traits of the subject, in this case the leader, influence his susceptibility to harm. Elements of personality, gender, age or maturity will further be explained. In the same way, environmental characteristics could elevate the levels of harm one could encounter. A highly competitive and high-performance environment, as described in the vulnerability paradox, or a hostile or even toxic environment could inflate the amount of harm one is susceptible to.

Fifthly, the definition allows us to comprehend the reluctance of leaders to identify themselves as vulnerable, without adopting the normative view behind this reluctance. Although all respondents acknowledge the existence of leader vulnerability, 14 out of 25 respondents in the first wave spontaneously associate vulnerability with weakness. The hesitation to label oneself as vulnerable can probably be related with a specific, negative interpretation of the reduced capacity to protect or defend oneself from harm, namely being “in need of special care, support, or protection” (Oxford Dictionaries). Further, juridical documents identify vulnerable persons oft in terms of disability, destabilized mental health, poverty, limited autonomy due to young or old age etc. With our model of vulnerability, we make the sometimes negative framing of vulnerability understandable, by referring to the negativity of the felt vulnerability or the potential costs (cfr. *infra*). Above all, we see in this general reluctance of identifying oneself as vulnerable a conformation of the vulnerability paradox. High performance and perfectionistic environments create or reinforce the negative image

surrounding the notion of vulnerability. As stated before, we see weakness as the more normative or judgmental interpretation of our neutral framing

Baseline for a taxonomy of vulnerability

Based upon the first data collection, we identified patterns in the interpretation and experience of vulnerability by the respondents. These emerging insights were further refined and tested in the second data collection. We've come to the conclusion that there are different manifestations of vulnerability. We will use these basic categories as a taxonomy of vulnerability.

A first element detected within the reported leader vulnerability is the *unrecognized vulnerability*. In this case, the leader is vulnerable, meaning that he is susceptible for potential harm, but he is unaware of that susceptibility. This manifestation of vulnerability is possibly perceivable and thus known by others, although not known by the leader himself.

“Well, without any doubt it {vulnerability} is perceivable. It is even perceivable when I'm not aware of it. How it gets perceived? ... Well, that ... I'll give you an example. Just last week, in an argument, my two other partners pointed out the fact that I'm too impulsive. ...And I was totally unaware of it. ... So you confront yourself with those weak points in those circumstances, and you improve yourself”.

However, in this particular manifestation of vulnerability, the leader is unable to alter or influence the potential to be harmed. In highly competitive environments, as described in the vulnerability paradox, it is probable that the perceiver of this vulnerability use this vulnerability to his or her advantage and will therefore abuse this ignorance.

Finally, the last manifestation of vulnerability within our model points towards the internal presence and emotional dynamics of vulnerability, which we describe as *felt*

vulnerability. While this element of vulnerability is not materialized in specific behavior and is thus consequently not perceivable, the weight of this emotional-affective component can scarcely be overstated. All respondents describe this manifestation of vulnerability as a negative emotional state, referring to feelings of insecurity, anxiety or indicate being upset, being without courage, etc. as referenced in Table 2.

The most obvious is the conscious display of vulnerability through specific behaviors (*displayed vulnerability*). We've detected the following vulnerable behaviors in the testimonials of the interviewed leaders: intentionally breaking a corporate protocol, acts of voice, displaying emotions, displaying signs of insecurity, discussing or clarifying organizational problems, admitting or discussing a mistake made by the leader, admitting lacking some skills or knowledge, asking for help or feedback and apologizing. The most frequently reported behavioral manifestations are: admitting a mistake (29% of the total number of vulnerable behavior), asking for help or feedback (14,5%) admitting the lack of SKA's (11%) and displaying emotions (14,5%).

When leader vulnerability is visible, whether intentional, aware or not, the consequence is that in some cases it will be identified as vulnerability by followers, superiors or other stakeholders (*perceived vulnerability*). We would stretch the nature of the data too much, if we would be on the lookout for "alleged perceptions of the leader of the vulnerability perceptions of the others" (colleagues, higher managers and followers). However, several respondents highlighted with their testimonials that perceived vulnerability is a stand-alone category:

"What is important today, is not necessarily how you see yourself. It is important how others see you, got it? So you can think that you are the mightiest on earth, but if others see you as weak, vulnerable, fragile, well... you are".

(Respondent 10, Italian CEO, first dataset)

“Vulnerability is perceived when the one who displays it, behaves insecure and weak. Someone who perceives insecurity and weakness in a certain person, understands that this person is vulnerable at that moment”.

(Respondent 17, Italian CEO, first dataset)

The unrecognized vulnerability contributes in understanding the previously mentioned vulnerability paradox. The vulnerability paradox is grounded on two characteristics of the present workplace, more precisely its volatility and competitiveness. Those elements create and at the same time conceal vulnerability. If we consult the list of causes of vulnerability in the self-reports of our leaders and identify the most prevalent categories (i.e. lacking SKA's, making mistakes, novice situation, unpredictability/uncontrollability), we can conclude that it is impossible not to be vulnerable and thus inevitable to become vulnerable. The volatility of the current workplace will inflate the unpredictability and uncontrollability, will more speedily outdate our present SKA's and will increase the likelihood that we find ourselves in situations that are new to us. It is probable that under those circumstances, we will make mistakes, while the competitive environment will hold that against us. To conclude, the vulnerability paradox is illustrated and explained by the unrecognized vulnerability category: because of the characteristics of the workplace, the list of causes of vulnerability is infinite, while our awareness remains limited. Consequently, we are constantly working under the threat of potential image loss or failure. Or we redeem ourselves of the burden of this constant stress with an open, non-defensive attitude, a well-developed self-awareness, so that with feedback seeking behavior and a learning goal orientation we become aware of this unrecognized and thus blind vulnerability. Or we overcompensate by reinforcing an image of infallibility and

perfection (e.g., respondent 8, second dataset), which in turn feeds, reconfirms and solidifies the vulnerability paradox.

To summarize the first, static description of leader vulnerability, we refer to the earlier definition, that vulnerability, understood as potential harm, can be felt, displayed, perceived or remain unrecognized. We see these elements as basic components of a vulnerability taxonomy.

Markers Within the Dynamics of Leader Vulnerability

Although the basic components of the vulnerability taxonomy clearly emerged in the analysis and interpretation of the first data collection and were confirmed in the second set, this rather static approach did not suffice to grasp the rich and detailed reports the respondents gave. More importantly, only focusing on the taxonomy, we are not able to explain the frequent reports of respondents remaining confident and calm while displaying the vulnerable behavior, when in fact the 62 descriptions of the felt vulnerability are pointing towards a heavy, emotional load (see Table 2). Neither did the taxonomy suffice to differentiate between a self-reported, effectively displayed vulnerability and the cases where respondents admitted to be too vulnerable and encountered real harm. Thirdly, we believe it is not only important to conclude *that* specific vulnerability manifestations are present or absent, but understand *why* a leader displays his or her vulnerability in one case and deliberately conceals it in another case. Finally, we are in need of a dynamic interpretation of vulnerability if we want to address the previously explained vulnerability paradox. We could only answer those questions and expectations by analyzing how the different manifestations of vulnerability are connected and focusing on the vulnerability dynamics: how and when vulnerability rises, when is it discovered, when and how does it peak or disappears?

In order to identify and connect the different manifestations of leader vulnerability within our taxonomy, we have to develop a basic determination process (see Table 3). If we want to understand the vulnerability dynamics (i.e. where an initial vulnerability shifts into another shape or manifestation) we also have to identify the drivers that propel the respondent to the next step. We use a determination process involving three basis questions. Does the leader *realizes* his own vulnerability, is he *transforming* his vulnerability and is he *showing* his vulnerability? We've identified self-awareness, self-regulation, political skills, psychological safety and competence as intermediary drivers explaining the shifts and metamorphose in the vulnerability.

If the leader is not aware (i.e., not *realizing*) of his vulnerability, we are automatically dealing with an *unrecognized* manifestation of vulnerability (cfr. *supra*), where the leader has no means to shape or alter this vulnerability (e.g. influence the impact or perception of the vulnerability). The vulnerability is already created, is already active, since it has the potential to harm the leader, but it has not been recognized yet. It is one of the major contribution of this research to point out that within the broader construct of leader vulnerability, there is an unconscious and thus involuntary manifestation or version.

Once the leader is aware of the vulnerability, he can decide what to do with it. He can *transform* the vulnerability by modifying its capacity for potential harm or he can choose to do nothing about it (denial, neglecting or taking a time out, postponing). Circling back to the vulnerability paradox, one could give the argument that the competition in the workplace, can possibly explain why the experience of the *felt vulnerability* is so threatening. More specific, because of the gravity of the felt vulnerability, the leader can be trapped in a loop of negative feelings by processes of rumination. In that case, the leader is tempted to suppress the negativity and pretend it never happened (e.g. respondent 2, first dataset). However, we cannot underestimate the investment the leader makes in this invisible, hidden manifestation of

vulnerability. Firstly, because the leader is largely aware of the dangers of the competitive environment, he will spend more time, emotional and mental energy worrying about the potential harm. According to the cognitive resource framework, worrying and rumination (Pugh, Skarlicki & Passell, 2003) forces the leader to delve into of a limited stock of resources that can no longer be addressed for other, more productive undertakings. Secondly, because the leader is aware of the high expectations that thrive in this competitive environment, he will attempt to align with his environment, probably by suppressing these negative feelings or will try to modify them. Research shows that emotion/thought suppression or modification is often not working (Wegner, 1994; Wegner, White, Schneider, & Carter, 1987) and is depleting (Muraven, Tice & Baumeister, 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). The more one tries to suppress a feeling, the more one gets fixated and thus confronted with it (Martijn, Tenbult, Merckelbach, Dreezens, & de Vries, 2002; Wegner, Erber, & Zanakos, 1994). The above could explain the perceived weight of the felt vulnerability by our respondents.

Nonetheless, each of the options (transformed or not) has the opportunity to be displayed or showed. That means that the leader can display an outer, behavioral vulnerability that is identical to the inner, felt vulnerability. This rather immediate, spontaneous, sometimes irrational sub manifestation of *displayed vulnerability*, consistent with the negative emotions, is labelled as *displayed vulnerability A* or *cloned vulnerability*. However, when the leader transforms the felt vulnerability and selects elements of it in function of an effective display, we categorize this manifestation as *displayed vulnerability B* or *transformed vulnerability*. The cloned vulnerability will feed the fear that underpins the vulnerability paradox. Unless it is developed in a psychologically safe environment (e.g., your partner at home, a deeply trusted colleague), it will push the potential threat towards real harm and reinforce the image that vulnerability is associated with weakness and unwanted hazards. Whereas our respondents experience the transformed vulnerability as a challenging but positive experience. Future

research should confirm that a displayed vulnerability B or a transformed vulnerability is not necessarily perceived as vulnerability, but rather seen as an act of courage, a learning moment, an investment in relational ties and a humble act of a human leader. If we reconnect the transformed vulnerability with the vulnerability paradox, it might seem as though the vulnerability was never there. However, the paradox of vulnerability will cease to exist the more the vulnerability is embedded in effective leadership, demonstrating that fully embracing and transforming one's vulnerability as a leader could be a compass to navigate successfully through the volatile environment the workplace is. While we made a case for the idea that the dynamics of the vulnerability paradox would gradually inflate the vulnerability, we would expect the opposite for a displayed vulnerability B. More precise, we would expect that a transformed and thus positively evaluated display of vulnerability would initiate positive, recurrent loops. Successful vulnerable leader behavior will probably encourage the leader to further refine and test this skill set, which could in turn have a cascading or contagious effect. Put differently, followers could use this vulnerable leader behavior as a model and interpret this behavior as a clear signal that the leader is developing an environment that is oriented on mutual respect and welcoming learning behavior.

With this determination process (i.e., asking whether the vulnerability is *realized*, *transformed* or *shown*), we can illustrate that not every manifestation of vulnerability is or should be displayed. Nor is one always aware of the fact that one can be potentially harmed. The most important contribution is that, even if the vulnerability not necessarily emerges by a conscious choice (e.g., someone giving you harsh and unexpected, negative feedback), one has always the autonomy to decide the amount and the shape of vulnerability one wants to display and share. The transformed vulnerability is a vulnerability that is consciously and voluntarily developed. Our model also recognizes the fact that vulnerability also emerges in the eye of the beholder. An unacknowledged vulnerability that is displayed, will be perceived by others, even

if the leader is not aware of it. Also, a displayed vulnerability A (cloned vulnerability) will probably be perceived and identified as vulnerable behavior, which will probably not be the case for displayed vulnerability B. Future research should investigate how these acts, labeled by the leader as vulnerable, are perceived by others in the workplace (cfr. *infra*).

Clarifying the different elements of the transformation of the vulnerability

We clearly differentiated a cloned vulnerability (displayed vulnerability A) from the more effective, transformed vulnerability (displayed vulnerability B), where in the latter manifestation, the leader consciously and voluntarily reshapes the existing vulnerability. Yet, we have to demonstrate the specific processes that explain the shift towards a positively evaluated leader vulnerability. This shift consists of three elements: refocusing on the self, refocusing on the other and the environment and finally refocusing on the tasks or goals at hand. These processes are guided by self-awareness, emotion regulation, political skills and competence.

If the transformed vulnerability is connected to an ongoing and changing shift in focus, we firstly have to understand the focus within the cloned vulnerability. Like we mentioned before, the cloned vulnerability is characterized by immediacy. We do not believe that leaders engaging in that particular vulnerable behavior are intentionally self-destructive. We are more inclined to use the categorization of Baumgardner and Scher (1988), who speak of self-defeating tradeoffs. These kind of tradeoffs are the result of making a poor choice, focusing on immediate benefits while neglecting or underestimating some distal costs. The immediate character of the cloned vulnerability can be explained by the fact that the leader wants an immediate relieve of the emotional weight he or she is carrying. This need for immediate relieve obscures the damage or real harm the leader will encounter in the competitive environment that

surrounds him. Especially, when it comes to strong, negative feelings like fear, helplessness, one is strongly driven to terminate this emotionally exhausting state (Isen, 1984; Cialdini et al., 1973; Baumgardner & Scher, 1988). That a leader engaging in that particular, vulnerable behavior is probably not having enough consideration for the alternatives, can also be explained on an evolutionary base. Negative emotions like fear or anger are connected with specific psychological urges and physical reactions. Fear is pushing one psychologically and physically towards escape, creating an urge to break out and preparing the body to run or flee (Levenson, 1992). These specific action tendencies are driven by the evolutionary urge for survival and this explains why negative emotions create a narrower vision and focus in comparison with positive emotions (Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & Schure, 1989; Lazarus, 1991; Levenson, 1994; Frederickson, 1998; Frederickson & Branigan, 2005). Indeed, from an evolutionary perspective, these negative emotions were functional, in the sense that they prepared our ancestors to deal immediately with the threat (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000). This line of thought is followed by the research in neuroscience. Ledoux (2000, p. 159) states that “emotions involve relatively primitive circuits that are conserved throughout mammalian evolution”. When detecting a threat, specific brain circuits (i.e., directly connecting thalamus with the amygdala) are functioning in an automatic and non-conscious way (Ledoux, 1996). When narrowing the spectrum of options, focusing on survival worked out well for our ancestors, it might not be the best cognitive or emotional strategy to survive in the present volatile and competitive environment.

In comparison to the leaders who display a cloned vulnerability, leaders who engage in vulnerable behavior that they evaluate as effective, transform their initial vulnerability. They transform their vulnerability in a specific way. 82 % of the respondents in the second dataset engaged in *emotion regulation* (Côté, 2005; Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1998) which is a first essential feature of the transformation of the vulnerability. In this stage, the leader attempts to

modify and control the negative emotions that are abundantly present in the felt vulnerability. An essential element of transforming the vulnerability lies firstly on the restructuring the inner focus and balance. Our respondents mentioned three different behavioral manifestations of emotional regulation. 39% vented the emotional distress in a psychologically safe environment, after which the respondents could act and think more rationally. 33 % mentioned intentionally concealing or suppressing the inner emotions in order to be able to behave and perform as a leader. Finally, 28% installed a cool down period or moratorium to come to their senses.

60% of the respondents further clearly demonstrated to be *politically skilled*. While the first element of the transformation is rather inward, focusing on the self, the second transformation is outward, focusing on the team and the context. Politically skilled respondents showed to have “the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organizational objectives” (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 127). Firstly, these respondents highlighted their social astuteness (Ferris et al., 2007) by being sensitive to the needs of the team and the particular situation. They also underlined their political skillfulness by recalibrating their actions (and thus the displayed vulnerability) towards the detected needs and perils of their environment. This illustration of flexibility (Pfeffer, 1992) is the second element of the political skills that are detected in the analysis of the self-reports of the leaders.

Finally, the leaders who describe their displayed vulnerability as a positive and successful experience, managed to connect the vulnerable behavior to the tasks at hand or the organizational goals. More specific, by engaging in vulnerable leader behavior, they try to influence and manipulate the origins or consequences of potential harm. In cases where the harm is already done (e.g. mistakes are made, projects are failed), they try to bend the sole negativity into a collective learning experience (e.g., by openly discussing the problems the organization is facing, openly admitting the mistakes that are made). Leaders that positively

evaluated their displayed vulnerability did also refer to the benefits for the follower, the team or the organization. In their narratives, they state that their leader vulnerability triggered a willingness to help, helped developing a stronger relation with the follower and stimulated a learning climate.

With their display of vulnerable behavior, the leaders often attempt to prevent a greater organizational harm, paradoxically by increasing their exposure to personal harm. More research need to be done to determine the tipping point on the personal harm, but our data collection clearly reveals competence as a bottom line for a positive evaluation of the vulnerable behavior. Even if the leader manages the balance out his inner feelings, is aware of the needs of the context and the team and is still focused on the organizational goals, a displayed vulnerability that threatens the core competency of the leader, will rarely turn out to be an effective leader behavior.

Contextual factors that frame and influence the vulnerability process

While the process-oriented approach on leader vulnerability allows us to detect the fluctuations in the amount of vulnerability that is experienced, displayed or perceived, two contextual factors can lower or boost the overall potential to be harmed within this process. These elements can be clustered around personal factors and environmental factors. On the personal level, we see that personality is an important element in effective dealing with the experienced vulnerability, just like we have respondents mentioning age and gender. However not mentioned, we believe that ethnic back ground or social class could complement this list. On the environmental elements, respondents state that they behave more vigilant in hostile environments and are rather unwilling to display leader vulnerability in these kind of organizations or teams. If leaders want at worst to survive and at best thrive while displaying vulnerability, they must monitor the environment for cues for their behavior. These cues are

reflecting the core elements of an organizational environment that impede or promote acts of vulnerability.

An Overview of Vulnerability Dynamics

If we take all the elements of the vulnerability-taxonomy (i.e., unrecognized, felt, displayed A, displayed B, perceived vulnerability) into account and combine them with the intermediary actions, we can understand and explain the vulnerability dynamics as they emerged in the leader narratives. We've related the importance of self-awareness to the development of the felt-vulnerability. In cases of effective vulnerability display, the leader transformed the initial vulnerability, by regulating his emotions, applying his political skills to create the right moment and approach to display the behavior and finally he connected the vulnerability to the relevant organizational goals and processes. If a leader ignores to transform the initial vulnerability, the displayed vulnerability seemed to be experienced as detrimental, unless it is exerted in a psychologically safe environment. When a leader wants to display vulnerability in a positive way, the displayed vulnerability is the outcome of a balanced, continuous dialogue (van Loon & van Dijk, 2015). Further, we've demonstrated that competency is an important element in the evaluation of vulnerability. Respondents clearly indicate that a single vulnerable behavior can be effective, while a higher frequency can erode the perceived or felt competency of a leader.

Consequences of the model: contextual fluctuations of leader vulnerability

The model on leader vulnerability not only reveals the emotions and behavior of the leader, it also highlights the fluctuations of the vulnerability itself. Whereas previous literature would describe vulnerability as stable (e.g., vulnerability in personality-research), or in "on-of-models" (e.g., trust intentions versus trust enactment), this research would propose variations in the amount of vulnerability. When analyzing the dynamics of the vulnerability, we can conclude that the amount and content of the vulnerability changes throughout the process.

Although we have no quantitative data collection, the narratives of the leader do give indications about the increase and decrease of the experienced vulnerability. The synthesis of those fluctuations is visualized in figure 2. The first element within the vulnerability fluctuations is localized in the rising. Table 2 clarified the specific origins of the vulnerability. The rise of vulnerability is, in line with our definition, always connected to the creation of possible harm. Further, when realizing being in a vulnerable situation, the respondent shifts from the unrecognized vulnerability to felt vulnerability via self-awareness. Realizing that one is vulnerable results in a variety of negative feelings. This awareness increases the vulnerability and we expect that rumination can initiate negative, emotional loops, continuously enlarging the amount of vulnerability that is experienced. Leaders can finally augmenting the vulnerability by displaying the felt vulnerability immediately, displaying a cloned vulnerability. The vulnerability is peaking at that moment, shifting the potential harm towards real harm (red line in figure 2). Aside from this option, respondents do have other measures at their disposal to shrink the amount of vulnerability to acceptable levels. Respondents decrease their vulnerability if they transform the vulnerability with a triple shift in focus (internal focus, focus on others and focus on the task or organization). A displayed vulnerability B (transformed vulnerability) still increases the vulnerability, but this well-balanced display is essential to turn the display of the vulnerability into a positive experience for the leader (blue line in figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

An Illustration of the Vulnerable Leader Framework Building on Two Opposite Cases

To explain and illustrate our model, we use two cases of reported leader vulnerability. We've selected the cases based upon their potential to reveal as many as possible of the underlying mechanisms. A second selection criteria was the evaluations of the respondent whether they classified the case as effective (case 1) or unsuccessful (case 2).

Case one: a positively evaluated case of displayed B/ transformed vulnerability

The first cases recounts the story of Belgian head nurse in a health care facility. She has a tenure of 10 year in her present job. The whole reorganization is restructuring and the head nurse will have to lead two teams instead of one, both merged into a newly composed unit. The *rise* of the vulnerability-issue is attributed to the fact that the team doubts the capacity of the head nurse to effectively deal with this new situation. The doubting team members are gossiping among each other, without the nurse being aware of that. However this vulnerability remains *unrecognized* (part 1), the lack of confidence in the head nurse could undermine her leadership and the team performance (*potential harm*). Reconnecting this with the earlier definition, we have indications of potential harm, which is a core dimension of vulnerability. More specific, the vulnerability is not associated with an internal process of lowered defense, but rather, heightened potential of external threat. At a certain moment, two followers come to her office and reveal the team gossiping. Although the potential harm was already present in a slumbering, unrecognized phase, the head nurse now *realizes* the vulnerable position she is in. The shape of the vulnerability shifts when entering the “*felt vulnerability-phase*”. We interpreted this as an increasing vulnerability, because the potential harm is still there, but the nurse now also has to deal with the burden of the negative emotions accompanying her discovery of being vulnerable. The felt vulnerability was described first as a “negative feeling”, “being emotionally upset”, “feeling disappointed”, admitting that “it hurts, knowing there is no trust in me”. “It touches me, and eh I feel so {low}, on a level of self-confidence, like, will I be able to manage? I started doubting myself a bit”. When we asked to whom she *displayed* this “felt vulnerability”, she explained she talked to her partner at home to let some steam off. This is a displayed vulnerability A (cloned vulnerability), but in a setting with a lot of psychological safety. In our model, we see that the felt vulnerability can be immediately shift to *displayed vulnerability A*, “venting” the negative feelings to a trusted one. The environmental characteristics in which this

vulnerability process unfolds, are guided by sincerity, respect and care, which lowers the overall vulnerability of her actions. The head nurse would also be willing to display this vulnerability with a trusted colleague (e.g. head nurses of another unit). She also had the possibility to reveal the cloned vulnerability to the team. When we asked her if she would immediately show the felt vulnerability, she says: “that is *very* vulnerable, that would be a bit too threatening”. We also asked how she would have addressed the team if she immediately went on to the displayed vulnerability: “less structured”, “more defensive” and “angrier”. She explicitly took the time to let it sink in and cool down, until she was more confident and less emotional. Although still not visible for the team, the head nurse *is transforming* her vulnerability, in the first place by exercising emotion regulation: the “increase, maintain, or decrease one or more components of an emotion” (Côté, 2005, p. 510). By taking some time for herself, described as “venting with myself” {...}, but also by talking about the felt vulnerability in a safe environment, it is clear that she is aware of specific techniques to deal with her emotions (Côté, DeCelles, McCarthy, Van Kleef, & Hideg, 2011). With those techniques “you have to transform that {felt vulnerability}, because actually, you perceive this subjectively, and you have to transform that into something objectively, perhaps they are just worried for me, not negative”. After that period of emotion regulation and preparing herself mentally (“I had the time to think about it”) she held a meeting with her team. She starts referring to the change-process the organization is in, showing some understanding for the resistance that comes with it, but she states “that we have to deal with it constructively”. She addresses the fact that the team doubts her capacity, which is a clear display of *displayed vulnerability*, but she interprets it in a positive way: “I heard there is fear, concerning me, that you are afraid that I will not be able to manage it. That you seem to be worried and that is nice”. She continues, affirming her leadership identity: “but I believe in myself and I would like you to stand behind me, because we are a team”. “I want to go for it, but still I want to hear your fears, even towards me”. This is again *displayed*

vulnerability, because she is not avoiding the delicate topic and she is not using power or control to diffuse the situation. The team affirmed standing behind her and apparently, the questions that came were only practical: where will your desk be if you have to run two teams and will you still be present in the unit? The head nurse is aware of the needs of team and reassures them, by taking away some of their doubts and answering their questions and remain focused on her assignment to guide the new team through the organizational change process. After regaining emotional balance, she focus on the needs and well-being of the team (*political skills*) and the tasks at hand.

Case 2: a case of displayed vulnerability, negatively evaluated by the respondent

The respondent is also a head nurse with 26 years of experience in another health care institution. When reflecting over her own case, she negatively evaluates her displayed vulnerability: she considers herself having shown too much vulnerability. The *rise* of the vulnerability is situated in the moment where she had to start leading the team she once was a part of. The team members were older and had more experience than her. There were people in the team “that were not suited for health care and were very negative”. *The potential harm* was that the team did not grant her a leader identity ‘(DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and by consequence did not respect her decisions or follow her lead. Starting from the definition, it is clear that the potential harm is present, partially originating from environmental factors, i.e. the hostile team members, partially attributed to an internal presence of insecurity. She was aware of her vulnerability and the *felt vulnerability* was described as followed: feeling “desperate”, “insecure”, “unsafe”, “uncomfortable” and feeling like “failing”. In this case, the respondent evaluates the *displayed vulnerability* negatively. While on duty as a head nurse, she displayed the vulnerability guided by the felt vulnerability, showing her emotions (crying) and openly admitting that she “was sick of it, could not stand it anymore”. She is certain of the fact that people have seen those emotions (*perceived vulnerability*). In this case, the *felt vulnerability* is

cloned or copied in the *displayed vulnerability* A. The vulnerability was present when stepping up to lead her previous colleagues, because the potential harm was connected with her peers not granting her this leadership identity and she being insecure to claim this identity. The head nurse inflated this potential harm with ruminating the feelings of insecurity and desperation. Finally; she increased the vulnerability to the maximum by displaying it to the team. Her behavior was more problem-oriented by the fact she only reinforced the original, potential harm (i.e., acceptance of her leadership by the team) and she did not transform the vulnerability. She admit she knew “she had to arm” herself and “be stronger” instead of showing this vulnerability. Looking back to that difficult moment in her career, she now realizes that her felt vulnerability was *logically* connected to the new leadership identity she still had to craft, but was foremost transitory, since the felt vulnerability disappeared by accumulated experience and recognition by her superiors.

DISCUSSION

Whether vulnerable behavior leads towards a beneficial experience for the leader (and his employees) depends on the cause of the vulnerability, the potential harm, the environment in which the vulnerability was created and experienced, the traits of the leader and the process by which the vulnerability was unfold and altered. This research proposed a basic taxonomy to differentiate between the essential vulnerability manifestations, but foremost highlighted the transformational strategies that were applied to turn the initial negativity and potential harm into a positive experience (i.e. vulnerability as a strength). One of the major insights is the idea that leader vulnerability is paradoxically a strength when the leader embraces his or her vulnerability, as this is a necessary stepping stone in the transformation process. Instead of usually and intuitively keeping the vulnerability at a distance, the leader need to become aware of the vulnerability, recognize its presence and potential. It is in a second step that more distance

is created when regulating the emotional load and recalibrating the content and amount according to the needs and expectations of the people involved and according to an assessment of the contextual cues. Depending on the developed strategies within the vulnerability process the initial, potential to be harmed can either inflate or deflate, which makes it understandable that leaders in some case interpret the experienced vulnerability as a strength and in other cases as a weakness.

Next we look at the contingencies and the consequences. We identified that the initial vulnerability increases or decreases in a dynamic way. Specifically, we discovered that three questions are decisive in these dynamics: (1) is the vulnerability realized, (2) is the leader transforming this vulnerability in an open, solution-oriented way and (3) is the leader displaying the vulnerability? When a leader is aware of his vulnerability, he is able to influence it. When the leader feels or experiences the vulnerability, he can display it immediately or he can choose to deal with it, postpone or even refuse to display the vulnerability. This dealing is labeled as the transformation of the vulnerability. Transformation consists of containing and changing the negative emotions of the felt vulnerability (i.e., emotional regulation), shifting the attention towards the needs of the situation and the persons involved and (re)focus on his role and the task at hand. This inward orientation (awareness of and influencing emotions) and outward orientation (awareness of and influencing others) will demonstrate the emotional intelligence and political skills of the leader. Aware of his role or duties as a leader, a solution oriented approach implies a non-defensive analysis of the causes of the vulnerability, as well as an effective dealing with the consequences. Negative consequences (i.e., actual harm) are prevented or limited, while at the same time the leader bends the initial negativity into a positive experience. Not only is transforming a vulnerability a positive experience for the leader, the benefits of a well-balanced vulnerability spread out to the team and the organization. The leader narratives clearly mentioned a great willingness to help (from the follower), more learning

behavior and stronger relations with the followers. Reports of the leader also indicate that these beneficial experiences are especially emerging in psychologically safe environments. Secondly, positive evaluations of displayed vulnerability are connected with the experience that the displayed vulnerability did not erode or question the competency of the leader.

Now that we've discussed the content of the model, we can now reconnect our findings with the pre-existing literature on leadership and vulnerability. On the one hand, this research has a unique focus, in the sense that it responds to the scarcity on research that takes leader vulnerability as a central lens. On the other hand, the strength of this research resides in the fact that it not only clarifies the broader construct of leader vulnerability, but it also explains how the previous literature presented a unique, however partial conceptualization of this broader concept. Using the metaphor of the puzzle, we believe that the different, existing theoretical angles are similar to different pieces of a puzzle. They all offer a significant and distinctive piece of the puzzle that can be studied. At the same time this specific focus can also be integrated in a bigger framework. The metaphor of the puzzle highlights how the merits of the existing frame of knowledge are recognized while at the same time we can highlight the contribution of this research.

Circling back to the trust, we conclude that this literature offers a very specific angle on our broader concept of vulnerability. The vulnerability within trust is developed in a dyadic relation, accompanied by the positive expectation of a beneficial reciprocation by the trustee and is expressed in a behavioral manifestation. Within our framework, these particular characteristics belong to a very specific segment of displayed vulnerability, while the propensity to trust could reside in pre-dispositions of a person influencing the level of risk or harm. When we compare our findings to the trust literature, we acquired more insight in what vulnerability looks and feels like. Our findings could support further trust research in clarifying what it is that could be lost, risked or damaged. Further, we discovered other manifestations of

vulnerability. Otherwise said, the trust-literature will identify vulnerability as a possible end product or an optional, yet logical consequence of the amount of trust rising above the perceived risk. However, this research shows that the vulnerability can be developed outside a trust-context and be present outside a behavioral manifestation (i.e. in unrecognized and felt vulnerability). Within the vulnerability-dynamics, we would rather state that displaying the vulnerability *increases* the potentiality of harm (our approach), rather than *creating* the potential harm (the trust approach). In other words; the rise of the vulnerability does not necessarily coincides with the display of vulnerable behavior. Foremost, this research pays attention to the importance of the felt vulnerability, in this case developed by the trustor. This kind of vulnerability, not materialized in risky behavior, has the risk not be noticed within trust. The burden of the felt vulnerability can hardly be underestimated, with its 100% negative categorization. Those feelings of insecurity, anxiety, weakness create a significant, yet often invisible emotional burden and underline the need for emotion regulation. Perhaps those negative feelings also influence the rational calculus of the trust-approach.

Our findings can be reconnected with the literature on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) in the sense that the general belief that the team provides a secure environment, will have an impact on the likelihood of harm when engaging in vulnerable behavior. It will also influence the willingness to engage in vulnerable behavior. The specific angle of psychological safety will especially relate to the felt vulnerability. A psychologically safe environment should prevent or alleviate the emotional burden that normally accompanies the felt vulnerability. Further, respondents in our interviews stated that leaders engaged in vulnerable behavior with the intention of installing a mindset of learning. This intention is arguable based upon the previous research on psychological safety. Psychological safety, that diminishes the probability of harm when displaying vulnerability, is a key antecedent for a learning culture. Thirdly, positively evaluated vulnerable leader behavior will probably

encourage the leader to refine and test this skill set, which could in turn have a cascading or contagious effect. Put differently, the repeated, well-balanced display of leader vulnerability could be the clearest indication of a psychologically safe environment and therefore convincing the reluctant team members to initiate similar vulnerability processes. With this research, we confirm the importance of the leader in developing an environment that is oriented on mutual respect and that is open for learning (Hult, Hurley, Guinipero, & Nich, 2000; Edmondson, 1999; 2003). Our research also describes what this vulnerability consists of, looks and feels like and therefore makes the inner processes that drive learning and risk taking behavior more transparent. Our shift from the self, to others and the organization aligns with the recent research of Edmondson and Lei (2014) where psychological safety is a necessary but not sufficient condition to engage in vulnerable behavior. Our focus on role behavior illustrates that one needs more than a psychologically safe environment for an effective leader vulnerability. When the vulnerability is embedded in the tasks at hand or the organizational culture, the vulnerability is more worth the effort. Foremost, we see a connection between the felt vulnerability category and the climate of care and mutual respect. In a psychologically safe environment, the depleting loops are probably absent, which in turn leaves the emotional and cognitive resources untouched, so that the energy of leaders and employees can be devoted to exploring, learning, recovering from mistakes.

Our research also contributes to the authenticity-literature. As we explained previously, according to authentic leadership theory, displaying vulnerability is an important way of revealing one's true self. There is alignment between authentic and vulnerable leadership in the sense that it pays attention to inner experiences (e.g., emotions), behavioral manifestations and perceptions. Also, the felt vulnerability category aligns with authentic leadership, since it could turn into a stepping stone towards acceptance and possible transformation of the rather negative elements in the relevant self-information. This resembles to a second element of authentic

leadership, namely balanced processing. Balanced processing as “objectivity and acceptance of one’s positive and negative attributes and qualities” (Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013, p. 60), will reinforce the understanding of the vulnerability.

This research however, could potentially question the rather optimistic framing of vulnerability within authentic leadership. We want to illustrate this statement with the notion of self-awareness. On the one hand, Avolio and Gardner (2005, p. 324) state that self-awareness also includes “having a basic and fundamental awareness of one’s knowledge, experience, and capabilities”. On the other hand, authentic leadership tends to interpret this neutral framing with the rather positive interpretation: “a process where one continually comes to understand his or her unique talents, strengths, sense of purpose, core values, beliefs and desires” (Gardner et al., 2005, p. 349). At the same time, our concept of felt vulnerability will rather point at the negative emotions that are present due to the awareness of lacking those skills, missing experience and outdated knowledge. The insights on the emotional burden send a warning signal to leaders who would otherwise overoptimistically engage in authentic leadership behavior. We believe that the authentic leadership theory, influenced by the positive psychology in its roots (Gardner et al., 2005; Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), overaccented the positive elements of vulnerability in authenticity. Indeed, authentic leadership has been criticized (e.g., Pfeffer, 2015) for focusing mostly on positive outcomes (Gardner et al., 2011), which does not fully correspond with reality as others have described it (e.g., Culbert, 2008). For example, the observation that some leaders seem to communicate transparently but are also seen as jerks (Goffee & Jones, 2005) attests to this idea. Our focus on leader vulnerability will elaborate on this recent turn in authentic leadership by further exploring and revealing the dark side of authenticity. If authenticity fundamentally means being true to the self (Leroy, 2012), our vulnerability-research could offer a path way to go beyond a comfortable and surface-level interpretation and experience of authenticity. More specific, if staying “true

to the self” only resides in revealing strengths, passions and areas of excellency (e.g., domains in which one has a high expertise), authentic leadership could end up promoting a “wellness-authenticity”.

After having explained how trust, psychological safety and authentic leadership are related to our broader notion of vulnerability, we would also like to include the topic of workplace courage. Just like the three aforementioned theories, workplace courage offers a particular interpretation of vulnerability. The vulnerability, developed by engaging in courageous behaviors, is connected with a worthy cause and should be intentional (Cavanagh & Moberg, 1999; Harris, 2001; Walton, 1986; Koerner, 2014). However, can we classify workplace courage as vulnerable behavior, since both notions share the ‘potential to be harmed’? If the answer is positive, the distinctive manifestation of courage would reside in the pursuit of a morally worthy goal, which is not surprising given its long tradition in virtue ethics. If the answer is negative and courage is not an illustration of vulnerability, then the question remains what the relation is between courage and vulnerability? Is courage an essential antecedent of vulnerability? Is strategic and balanced display of vulnerability not also warning for an all to bold and brave leader behavior? Since the research on workplace courage is still in an early phase, we believe these interesting questions could also challenge the development of the concept of workplace courage.

Another specific manifestation of workplace vulnerability is voice. Voice can be defined as “the discretionary provision of information intended to improve organizational functioning to someone inside an organization with the perceived authority to act” (Detert & Burris, 2007, p. 869). Voice shares the root-element of vulnerability, namely the potential to be harmed and can therefore be seen as a specific manifestation of vulnerability. The specificity of voice is situated in the fact that the vulnerable behavior is deliberate and well defined (i.e., speaking up and thus challenging the status quo), is situated in a hierarchical and thus asymmetrical relation

(i.e., power, status and position difference) and encompasses specific risks (e.g., career damage, image damage etc.). Voice has paid considerable attention to the feelings of vulnerability. More specific, fear of retaliation by a superior, getting a negative image (e.g., troublemaker) or damaging relations is one of the most important reasons why employees remain silent (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003; Milliken & Morrison, 2003). Just like in our model, voice acknowledges the value of emotion regulation to calm and cool down the emotional voice candidate (Grant, 2013).

Our research also highlights the importance of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligent leaders will have a significant advantage in detecting, transforming and displaying the vulnerability. Firstly, we demonstrated the importance of self-awareness to move from unrecognized to felt vulnerability. Also related to emotional intelligence, is the emotional regulation. During the vulnerability-process, leaders need to balance out their inner emotions. Immediate display (cloned vulnerability) while being confused and hopeless equals a pilot flying through the fog without instruments. After coming to one's self, one can direct energy and focus to the environment. If one is no longer burdened by the overwhelming negativity of the threat, it is more likely that one can tap into his or her cognitive resources to meet the needs of others or the demands of the task at hand (Creswell et al., 2013). Emotional intelligence is also illustrated by the political skills involved in the vulnerability-process. In general, emotionally intelligent leaders are aware of their own feelings, they can estimate how these feeling affect their own decision making capacity (Avolio, 2003; George, 2000; Gardner et al., 2005), but they are also aware of their impact and influence while displaying these feelings to the follower or other professionals in the workplace. Therefore, they do not shy from self-disclosure (Kernis, 2003), but they only display these true emotions in an appropriate way, minimizing the potential damaging outcomes (Hughes, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005).

Based upon our findings, we are convinced that our model of vulnerable leadership also sheds a new light on servant leadership theory. Vulnerability is intimately related to the humility-dimension of servant leadership, often framed as the core dimension of servant leadership (Patterson, 2003; Russel, 2001; Asag-Gau & van Dierendonk, 2011). Our findings on leader vulnerability especially resonate with this humility-dimension of servant leadership as constructed by van Dierendonk (2011): understanding one's weak and strong points and admitting one's limits and mistakes. According to van Dierendonk and Nuijten (2011), servant leaders acknowledge their limits and rely on others to overcome them. The research of Owens and Hekman (2012) on humility similarly stresses the importance of admitting errors and limitations combined with the intention to let followers flourish.

Just like competence is an important element in the assessment of the trustworthiness of the trustee and judgement of performance is essential for positive outcomes on voice (Burris, Detert & Romney, 2013), we've demonstrated the importance of competence in displaying vulnerability. We are convinced that the leader's vulnerability is no exception to his competence, rather an illustration of his or her leader capabilities. This means on the one hand that as a leader, s/he is skillfully taking the matter into hand, preventing actual harm or diminishing the potential harm. To do so, the leader might even temporarily increase that harm by displaying vulnerability. The competence element means on the other hand that the displayed vulnerability should rather not question the basic or core competence level of the leader. Based upon the research of Aronson, Willerman, and Floyd (1966) and 'the pratfall-experiment' in mind, we could understand why a displayed vulnerability (i.e. acting clumsy) would backfire at the mediocre leader, making him look less attractive and just confirms the already established mediocrity. Further, they state that a high achiever displaying vulnerability has the possibility being perceived as more human, which opens the way for relational identification from the follower with the leader. The fact that competence is an important element in the vulnerability-

dynamics, is also confirmed in the research of Owens & Hekman (2012). Humble leadership, which features are related to our vulnerable leadership, is only effective if the leader is competent. Competence is also connected with remaining 'leaderly' in one's behavior (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). When displaying this vulnerability, the leader has found the balance between expressing relevant emotions or thoughts and remain aware of his role and function. This reminds the leader that even displaying vulnerability is fundamentally connected with the process of influence towards the attainment of organizational goals (Bass & Bass, 2008; Yukl, 2010). Our model warns for cases where only the vulnerable leader is present and the leadership competencies are missing. This display will reinforce the mechanisms of the vulnerability paradox and will dismiss the potential beneficial side of vulnerable leadership.

This research focus on vulnerability is a novel, but not an illogical step, when taking the evolution of the leadership theory under scrutiny. Reflections on leader vulnerability join what has been called post-heroic models of leadership (Fletcher, 2004). These recent models interpret leadership less individualistic, but rather as a relational, collective and shared endeavor. Indeed, scholarly reflection on leader vulnerability would not have been possible in the beginning of leadership theory, probably because the preeminent theories would have perceived vulnerable leadership as an oxymoron, like respondent 13 in the first wave literally stated. More specific, in the first decades of the 20th century, the trait-theory was focusing on defining overarching characteristics of leaders defined as "the superior few" (Dowd, 1936, quoted in Bass, 2008, p. 49). This research-approach is commonly referred to as the "Great Man- theory" (Northouse, p. 19; Bass, 2008, p. 49). Further, early leadership theories were rather leader-centric, because the process of influencing others towards organizational goals was initiated by the leader and was hierarchically trickling down. Progressively, those leader-centric models changed in models of lateral or bottom-up influencing, in order to reach organizational goals (Pearce & Conger, 2003, p. 1). As a first consequence, more collectivistic oriented interpretations of

leadership gained more importance than the sole focus on the individual leader (Yammarino et al. 2012). Also the status of the leader transformed. Recent leadership theories depict a leader driven by the realization of the mission and not capitalizing on his status or honor (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 397). Different manifestations of this evolutions are known under concepts as the aforementioned servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), but also shared leadership (Pearce, 2004; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Carson et al., 2007), distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011), participative leadership (Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder, 1993; Koopman & Wierdsma, 1998, Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 1997) and humble leadership (Owens & Hekman, 2013; Owens & Hekman, 2015; Owens, Johnson & Mitchell, 2013; Collins, 2001). The majority of our respondents adhered to those recent, less leader-centric models. As an Italian CEO explains his adopted leadership style:

“Well, first and for all {it is about} a horizontal mentality. What does this mean? Let’s abolish the old pyramids with only one person at the top. Let’s leave them to the {old} Egyptians. Nowadays, running a business is about humility, transparency, collaboration and knowing to listen. Those are fundamental values and if a leader doesn’t have them, he closes tomorrow”.

However, it would be incorrect to describe the interpretation of the leader and the significance of his actions as larger-than-life only as a relic of the past, since it is still resonating in implicit leadership theories as the “Romance of leadership” (Meindl et al., 1985; Meindl, 2004). It is a believe or a form of sense making (Weick, 1995) that creates feelings of control and security (Meindl, 2004, p. 464) for the follower, which in turn helps dealing with organizational complexity. Chen and Meindl (1991) underline the role of the media in shaping this particular, super-sized image of the leader. The idea of an effective, yet vulnerable leader will not fit the dualistic view of the romance of leadership where a leader is either glorified or demonized. Still, awareness of the implicit leadership theories uphold by the follower is

important, since vulnerable leadership behavior may put this implicit believes under pressure. As another Italian CEO warns:

“It is not so evident that we, and when I say we, I mean the persons who have the same position as I have {i.e., CEO}, are human and thus make mistakes, have our insecurities, not always have all the solutions and the answers. Things we take for granted, but they are not in reality, trust me. What they {employees} are finally looking for, is a sense of security... and if one day you ask that feeling of security, walk in their shoes, {...} you break down the mechanism they lean on”.

To resume, based on the evolution of leadership theory, vulnerable leadership will not be interpreted as an oxymoron, but the Romance of leadership might challenge the leader to carefully craft his displayed vulnerability, in order not to imbalance the implicit believe systems of the follower. We believe that this careful and well balanced approach is embedded in the element of political skills in our model.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing literature on paradoxes in organizational behavior and leadership (Quinn & Cameron, Lewis, 2000; 1988; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith; 2015). Relying on Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 382), a paradox consists of “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time”. Because each element of the paradox has its own logic and needs, the coexistence creates a tension for the employee or the organization. This tension and the accompanying discomfort makes it tempting to choose one element for the other. However, the core premise of the paradox theory is localized in embracing this paradoxical situation: being aware of the tension, accepting that both elements are needed and engaging in constant iteration between those opposing forces, which in turn creates a dynamic equilibrium and sustainable growth. With our research, we illustrate this

dynamic equilibrium within the field of leadership. We explain how internal (with one's feelings, thoughts, behavior) and external dialogue (with the environment, one's team and organization) embraces the simultaneity of opposing forces in a vulnerability process. More precisely, we've potentially clarified what emotional equanimity and behavioral complexity looks and feels like. Firstly, it is being aware of the inner emotions, restoring inner balance, and initiating a non-defensive exploration of causes and consequences. The narrowing vision of fear for one's own harm or damage is balanced out with what is necessary for the company, what is needed by the team. Secondly, allowing vulnerability for oneself and displaying a transformed vulnerability, is the kind of leader behavior that acknowledges the complexity of the inner (mental or psychological) processes and shows the environment that one understands and manages workplace complexity. If the current workplace is deeply influenced by multiple and often competing demands, is often volatile and thus creating insecurity while requiring flexibility, it is not in need of a theory or practice that gives a false sense of stability or a superficial notion of certainty. Today's leaders will have to embrace the vulnerability that accompanies the current workplace and at the same time transform this vulnerability for continuous learning and sustainable growth. Or as Smith, Lewis and Tushman (2016, p. 68) put it so eloquently:

“Rather than seeking stability and certainty, paradoxical leadership depends on embracing dynamism and change. Leaders must be emotionally and cognitively open to the new, developing a management strategy of coping with, rather than controlling and minimizing, ambiguity. They must be humble, even vulnerable, admitting that they might not know what the future holds. This approach emphasizes the value of experimentation and failure, spurring critical feedback to enable learning and ongoing adjustments”.

Limitations and Future Research

We've adopted a qualitative approach for this research. It would be desirable to balance this approach with a more quantitative research. We planned further quantitative research combining validated constructs as psychological safety, emotional intelligence, personality combined with new scales on vulnerability.

Further, our study is conducted in the US (test interviews) and Europe (wave 1 and 2). Cultures shape what is commonly accepted as good leadership (House et al, 2002; House et al., 2004). National culture steers the formulation of ideals (e.g. ideal relations, ideal organizations etc.), guides practices of power, leadership and management and logically, the theory building that precedes or follows from these practices (Hofstede, 1993). Consequently, we also expect there to be cultural differences in the evaluation of leader vulnerability. Follow-up studies could focus on high-power- distance and collectivistic cultures (e.g., Asian organizations).

Future research should focus on further delineating the conditions in which vulnerable behavior is probably least detrimental. We've already found that vulnerability has the lowest potential to backfire in a psychologically safe environment. Since we've illustrated the importance of displayed vulnerability with organizational learning, we expect the learning orientation of the team or the organization to be very important. Relying on the goal orientation theory (Gong, Huang & Farh, 2009; Hirst, van Knippenberg & Zhou, 2009; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004), we believe collectives driven by (a) an individual performance approach goal or (b) a performance avoidance goal orientation will increase the probability of harm. Just like the research from Gong, Kim, Lee, and Zhu 2013 indicates that trust can have a negative side on information exchange and creativity with a performance goal orientation, we could expect that vulnerable behavior will most likely create harm in a climate driven by performance goal orientation. Also, we think that the staging and timing of the vulnerability is important to fit the context. Therefore, displaying too much vulnerability in an application process will probably

increase the likelihood of not getting hired. Even if there is a cultural climate open to leader vulnerability, the timing of the vulnerability (i.e., selection process) is not right. Further, high-performance environments will not necessarily block vulnerability *tout court*, but the timing and staging will determine the relevance or fruitfulness of the vulnerability. In contexts as life or death moments in the emergency room, hazardous combat situations, decisive moments in court or parliament, final moments before serving in an haute-cuisine restaurant, displayed vulnerability will be probably immediately penalized. Future research should verify this line of thought.

With our conceptual, yet provisional model we aim to open, stimulate and guide future research on leadership vulnerability. Our data included elements that require further scholarly scrutiny. We have indications that expressing vulnerability can paradoxically be an element of a defensive strategy. The display of vulnerability can possibly enhance immunity for negative feedback or negative consequences (e.g., sanctions, receiving a demanding assignment) and therefore vulnerability could possibly deviate accountability. Or, a leader can intentionally use vulnerability as a manipulative strategy to appear more human. These suggestions are in line with the literature on impression management, more precise the management of poor impressions, where people intentionally self-depreciate themselves either to look good or bad. According to Becker and Martin (1995), people engage in this specific form of impression management with several intentions (e.g., avoidance of difficult or extra tasks). Noteworthy is the fact that Becker and Martin (p. 183) use the category “broadcast limitations: “errors, mistakes, physical problems or other personal limitations to effective performance”. In the same way, Baumgardner and Brownlee (1987) stated that people who are particularly doubtful, intentionally failed or performed poorly to escape the expectations that accompany good performance. Displaying vulnerability strategically lowered the high expectations of others, but foremost liberated the subject from the pressure (external) and anxiety (internal).

Further research should also reveal how and why the perceived vulnerability modifies our proposed model. On the one hand, the displayed vulnerability could humanize the leader and therefore make him more accessible for questions or feedback, which in turn has an impact on voice, feedback or help seeking behavior. On the other hand, the perceptions of the follower will shed a light on the romance of leadership, where a vulnerable leader could possibly destabilize the harmonic and sometimes naïve image the follower has of his or her leader. An in-depth analysis of these perceptions will consolidate or modify the present results, discerned by data consisting of leader self-reports. In line with our previous suggestion, we would compare the difference between self-rated and observer rated vulnerability, leading to components of effective leadership behavior.

Although we developed a process-model of vulnerability, we never claimed an automatic or complete movement from unrecognized vulnerability, over felt to displayed and perceived vulnerability. On the contrary, we even pointed at the possibility of recursive loops. These recursive loops between different manifestations in the model highlight how at any stage of this process, vulnerability may reinforce itself negatively such that vulnerability breeds more vulnerability and thereby reduces the likelihood that it will positively impact relevant work-related outcomes. Future research should zoom in on the recursive loops to get more detailed knowledge on these interactions and iterations.

Finally, follow-up studies could have an experimental design that allows to switch between transient and more stable vulnerabilities. We've highlighted that the vulnerability dynamics consist of fluctuations of exposure to potential harm, but that this process is framed by personal and environmental factors. Experiments with different and well defined conditions could determine the relative weight of stable vulnerability elements versus transient vulnerability elements.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Practical Implications

Our research has made a valuable contribution to the leadership practice, because we explain and draw attention to the rather ‘silent suffering’ of a lot of managers who are under the constant impression that they fall short. More specific, the model sheds a light on the *feelings* of vulnerability that are intimately connected with the uncertainty and ambiguity that breeds our complex work environment (Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Galbraith, 1977; Geddes, Salyer, & Mark, 1999; Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007; Tucker & Edmondson, 2003; Weick, 1990). Indeed, in the current high paced and volatile work environment, what we know, what we do and even who we are (i.e., our core identity) is required to be under permanent construction, while demands for constant peak performance are very stable and persistent. Introducing this model in leadership development or mentorship could make understandable to junior managers that feelings of vulnerability are normal and often have a transitory nature. The stress and feelings of alienation that accompanies the felt vulnerability, could be appeased with this understanding. The inner resources that come available, can be devoted to more constructive strategies as learning and innovation.

This research is also meaningful for managers and leaders in the workplace, because it provides them with the strategies for displaying vulnerability without encountering real harm. Training these strategies could help people develop a strategic and balanced leader vulnerability, which in turn may be key to being effective in the current turbulent work environment. In an increasingly globalizing, interdependent and uncertain economy, the only constant is change (Verstraeten, 2000) and therefore the willingness and ability to confront one’s own shortcomings is key to one’s adaptability and thus one’s survival. In this regard Edmondson (2011, p. 55), suggested that we need to “recognize the inevitability of failure in today’s complex work organizations” by installing a culture that is open for experimentation

and is willing to share and analyze mistakes. However, in numerous day-to-day situations, employees experience that failure, limitations and imperfections are downplayed and only success stories are shared and studied (Rosen & Tesser; 1970; McGregor, 2006; Tavis & Aronson, 2007). In sum, it is virtually impossible not to experience those rather negative feelings of vulnerability in our present work environment. Even more, displaying specific forms of vulnerability are even necessary for personal and organizational development. At the same time, leaders and other employees are kept in the dark with these feelings, behaviors or perceptions of vulnerability because of the previously explained vulnerability paradox (i.e., an organizational climate that at the same time creates and dismisses vulnerability). Consequently it is crucial for academics and practitioners to offer pathways to deal with this vulnerability: understanding how it works, warning for the potential danger and costs, but also offering strategies for accepting its presence and if possible transforming the initial vulnerability. The objective is to rise above the common and intuitive negative interpretation, transform the initial vulnerability and bend it into a positive experience (i.e. a learning opportunity, signaling trustworthiness, establishing emotional or relational connections) for the leader, and preferably also for the team and the organization.

The implications of our findings are important, because we can potentially protect leaders from the unnecessary, negative consequences of displayed leader vulnerability, stating that *not every element* of the vulnerability needs to be displayed. If one feels helpless, hopeless and damaged, the emotional weight of this feelings is already substantial, so that one is not on the lookout for extra damage for having thoughtlessly and carelessly shared these feelings. Or if one becomes vulnerable by underperforming or making mistakes, a display of vulnerable behavior would be advised to incorporate elements of one's learning process and improvements in order to have a balanced display. It also means that not *displaying vulnerability at all* is still an option. Not every felt vulnerability should necessarily end up being displayed, even if it is

transformed. One can deal with the causes or consequences of the initial vulnerability, without the optional increase of risk by expressing the vulnerability. If a leader is willing to expose himself to a higher probability of harm by the display of vulnerability, he should only do so because paradoxically he wants to create positive consequences. Very passionate, however not necessarily constructive displayed leader vulnerability will immediately display the felt vulnerability, without dealing with the causes or consequences of the vulnerability. This displayed only copies the felt vulnerability and does not take the needs and expectations of the context or follower into account. Unless this vulnerability is displayed within an environment characterized by high psychological safety, an exposure of this kind could be detrimental for the leader. This display tilts the amount of vulnerability over the point of what is acceptable or affordable for a leader.

This research can contribute to the development of a balanced but vulnerable leadership practice explaining *when to display the vulnerability*. The temporal dimension in our process model warns for immediacy and hastiness. Displaying vulnerability as a leader can create exceptionally strong moments that leave a lasting impression, but a leader should not play this strong card too often or too soon. Repeating powerful displays of vulnerability (e.g. displaying emotions) too often could erode the exceptional moment or message the vulnerability is carrying (an intention to rally or invigorate the team, a clear warning that a line is crossed or a value is breached) and potentially backfire at leader who could be perceived as overemotional or unprofessional. Playing this card too soon, as previously explained, could propel the leader into real harm. Just taking the time to install a cooling down period could bring the potential and probability of harm to an acceptable level. Even if the leader engages successfully in emotion regulation, overriding the negative emotions can often be depleting and can therefore still result in loss of self-control afterwards (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Consequently, a time out could anyhow be advisable.

This research offers specific strategies for leaders to effectively deal with their own vulnerability by referring to the three loci of the transformation: installing a moment for emotion regulation to find inner balance (the self). If one is balanced, one can divert her or his energy and attention towards the needs of the others and the situation (other-dimension). If one is willing and fully prepared to engage in vulnerable behavior, it is advisable to focus on the specific context, making sure that this behavior never undermines a core competency or that the environment will not abuse the displayed vulnerability.

This research not only make the vulnerability paradox understandable, it offers also the strategies to transform the paradox. Transformation of the vulnerability paradox is finding the balance between recognizing the merits of high expertise, high standards and hard work while at the same be aware of the necessity of trial and error, exploration, detecting limits and areas of growth. Transforming the vulnerability paradox is unmasking and questioning corporate environments enforcing high performance standards by creating an atmosphere of infallibility, perfection and 'Darwinistic competition'. Consequently, these work places are thriving on stress or fear. These environments are most likely to install "vicious cycles" (Smith & Lewis, 2011) where anxiety, defensiveness is reinforced by organizational pressure. Under these circumstances, the tension becomes unbearable and the vulnerable leader narrows the paradoxical dynamic to a unidimensional choice: suppressing the vulnerability and probably engaging in a mindless compliance strategy, accompanied with impression management. Or, the leader engages thoughtlessly in vulnerable behavior, ignoring the environmental cues that vulnerability is not tolerated. In this case, the tension between high performance and vulnerability is no longer causing stress or discomfort, but this short term gain is quickly overshadowed by the encountered damage. Transforming the vulnerability paradox is embracing the vulnerability as well as the willingness to excel. This is exactly what the paradox literature teaches (Smith et al., 2010; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Tushman, 2005; Smith &

Lewis, 2011; Lewis, 2000): resist the temptation to eliminate the tension between performance and vulnerability. We believe that only by becoming aware of our vulnerability, embracing it and transforming it, we will be able to maintain those high standards that guide employees and organizations towards better performance and overall growth. If organizations want to remain competitive, employees are forced to put themselves out there and take risks. This research specified how we should aim at an acceptable risk and avoid encountering real harm. With this model we are able to identify the different phases a vulnerable leader could go through and we offer specific indications for positive, vulnerable behavior.

This research deconstructs stereotypical images of the leader as illustrated within leader romanticism, portraying him as heroic or larger-than-life (Meindl et al., 1985). In this way, this research circles back to the call of Ancona et al. (2007), where they are making a case for a more human and thus incomplete leader. With our research, we hold a similar plea, bringing leadership back to its everyday life proportion, foremost surfacing in mundane work-related issues and opening the way for other way of influencing as portrayed in authentic, humble, courageous and servant leadership.

Conclusion

Whether vulnerable behavior leads towards a beneficial experience for the leader (and his employees) depends on the cause of the vulnerability, the potential harm, the environment in which the vulnerability was created and experienced, the traits of the leader and the process by which the vulnerability was unfold and altered. This research proposed a basic taxonomy to differentiate between the essential vulnerability manifestations, but foremost highlighted the transformational strategies that were applied to turn the initial negativity and potential harm into a positive experience (i.e. vulnerability as a strength). The transformational processes can

be clustered around three loci: the leader, the others and the context. One of the major insights is the idea that leader vulnerability is paradoxically a strength when the leader embraces his or her vulnerability, since this appeared to be a necessary stepping stone in the transformation process. Instead of usually and intuitively keeping the vulnerability at a distance, the leader need to become aware of the vulnerability, recognize its presence and potential. It is only in a second step that more distance is created when regulating the emotional load and recalibrating the content and amount of the vulnerability according to the needs and expectations of the people involved and according to an assessment of the contextual cues. Depending on the developed strategies within the vulnerability process, the initial, potential to be harmed can either inflate or deflate, which makes it understandable that leaders in some case interpret the experienced vulnerability as a strength and in other cases as a weakness.

With our approach, the debate is no longer held on a normative level, asking whether vulnerability is a good or a bad thing. Neither do we frame the phenomenon in bipolar or static interpretation schemes: hide or show, allow or block, personal or professional. The real question became: what kind of vulnerability was initially present and how did the initial vulnerability evolve, who is the person experiencing this vulnerability and what is the context in which this particular manifestation of vulnerability takes place. With a clear taxonomy and process lens, we are able to identify and operationalize the concept with multiple manifestations, called vulnerability. Our model moves between Scylla and Charybdis where vulnerability is or underestimated as mere weakness and inadequacy or overrated if sold as a 100% guarantee for emotional bonds and the humanization of the leader. The first approach fails to recognize the potential of this phenomenon for leadership theory and practice. The last interpretations fails to acknowledge the potential harm and thus potential leadership costs.

VULNERABILITY AND THE RESEARCHER: VULNERABILITY AS THE MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND AUTHENTICITY

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the researcher is the main instrument of research in general and qualitative research in particular, it is only logical and even necessary that I include a reflexive analysis concerning my own position and beliefs, my aspirations and ambitions, my growth and stand still. Of course, I developed the research through my own actions and reflections, but at the same time I've grown as a person and researcher through the emerging insights.

RESEARCH PHILOSOPHIES

Because of my theological education, I was highly influenced by the hermeneutical approach that was and is mainstream in the ethics major I took. I was an adept of the post-Shoah ethics of Pollefeyt (1995, 1997, 1999, 2002) and the narrative ethics of Verstraeten (1994, 1996, 2002, 2016). Both of them were my academic mentors as a student, both intimately connected with the works of Paul Ricoeur (1985, 1986, 1990, 2000). While on an ontological level, this influence would be categorized as constructionist, whereas on epistemological level, it would be framed as subjectivist. Business researchers as Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008) would label it as an interpretivist philosophy.

However, slowly absorbing the largely quantitatively oriented management sciences, I believe the research I developed in this article is more maintaining a post positivistic stance. It is post positivistic, because it has the fundamental belief that knower and known are intertwined (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). I also questioned myself why I am so passionate about this topic.

Once I get passed the mandatory answer that I wanted to contribute and broaden the existing body of knowledge, I realized how deeply influenced I am by the left wing ACW/beweging.net (Christian labor movement) and its Christian democrat, political affiliation. I'm aware of the fact that an important part of my non-academic network is situated in that community. I also realize how key influential people (e.g. my grandparents) passed on this hopeful marriage of '*lutte et contemplation*' with their life story. Therefore, I know that I am more sensitive than other researchers to power-relations and injustice engendering structures. I try to be objective in my analysis, but I have to recognize that I sometimes feel resentment towards some (implicit) theories management scholars or business schools adopt (being elitist, being more focusing on profit instead of embedding it in human or organizational flourishing, in relation with a vibrant community and a globalized world). Perhaps I have emancipatory research ambitions, hoping to relieve young leaders of the burden of perfectionism, installed by other leaders who disguise and compensate for the fear encountering their own fallibility. However, I would not go that far to categorize these feelings and orientations as critical research. I do believe that these convictions are related with what I see as a live worth living. My ultimate dream and passion is to help developing the leaders the world needs or deserve. I don't have the time or the energy to influence one on one. Research is a powerful way to influence strategically, while remaining humble, because the text speaks for itself.

I also know that I'm always touched by the vulnerability I see around me. I can't help it: I always see it and I'm always touched by it, whether it is on the street, in the class room etc. I don't know why, but people always seem to find me the right person to open up to. Further I realize that my Christian faith is grounded in a peculiar believe that vulnerability can bring you closer to an ultimate end (God, Kingdom of heaven) as it was ultimately revealed on the cross, as described in the Holy Scripture. Philosophers like Nietzsche heavily contested this idea (*Entwertung/Umwertung aller Werte*), just like a lot of business leader or business scholars

would classify this utopia as mere delusion. For me, the vulnerability of Christ is the corner stone of my faith. It is the most difficult and even absurd element of my faith, but I have to embrace it if I want to grasp, feel and live the radical message of hope that rises from this vulnerability. In sum, the vulnerability of Christ is essential to frame my vision on power and leadership. Therefore, the biggest failures of leadership I've witnessed, were the want-to-be leaders who located vulnerability everywhere except within them self and at the same time adopted an immanent point of reference. The only way to uncover their hollow rhetoric, painfully disguised with a thin layer of religious veneer, is to see if and how they serve.

MY OWN RELATION WITH THE RESEARCH TOPIC: A MATTER OF ONGOING DIALOGUE AND DEVELOPMENT

From time to time, I noted in my memos how the research process evolved and how it affected me. So, when I was afterwards challenged by the question how I dealt with my own vulnerability, I could rely on these earlier notes.

First of all, I was very proud to have the opportunity to bridge authenticity and spirituality. I wanted to become a member of the academic community of authenticity scholars, embrace their thinking and at the same time challenge the current direction with the inclusion of spirituality. I also had the ambition too proof that the recent turn of leadership towards authenticity and humility could legitimate the longstanding, yet underestimated or even ridiculed tradition of leadership development in Christian spirituality or Catholic social teaching. Even stronger, how the emerging practice of top business schools worldwide could be rooted in a longstanding tradition of social justice, human dignity and solidarity. However, I romanticized the encounter between management sciences and the theological sciences,

convinced that I had sufficient amount of time, energy, experience and perseverance to tackle any kind of friction between these two worlds. However, soon it felt like connecting two vehicles, each of them travelling at high speed and not necessarily in the same direction. The initial enthusiasm, proudness and ambition made way for loneliness, hardship and friction, since the literature to cover was not only vast, but even conflicting in style, content and methods.

While the notion of vulnerability was not even a central topic at that state of my research, I was however already experiencing my own vulnerability. I wanted to emerge myself in the analysis and worldview of the management disciplines, proving myself being worthy of acceptance in these new academic circles. I wanted to master and uphold an academic rigor and as always, I wanted to excel. I felt vulnerable because I was struggling and learning on my own, trying to educate myself on the spot, reading manuals and good scholarly writing. I made myself vulnerable, because I saw my theological background as a disadvantage in the largely quantitatively oriented management sciences. At the same time, I only felt that the highest standards would be appropriate for ‘opus magnum’ (sic) in the making. The more I had to accept that I was learning, the higher I raised the bar and therefore increased my struggle to sometimes the level of desperation. There is nothing wrong with struggle and perseverance, but the struggle should be faced with a clear head, a clear focus and a realistic ambition. I did not see the bigger picture and I felt like drowning in a pacific ocean of management and authenticity literature, while I was used to sail skillfully and confidently the North Sea of ethics and spirituality.

It was only after a trip from Boston to Ithaca with one my promotors that I gained a real focus. With a clear focus on the topic of vulnerable leadership, adopting a qualitative approach, I remember being relieved able to devote my energy in a less dispersed way. If the first period of my research made me vulnerable because of my ambition and perhaps naivety, I felt relieved by the break through, but at the same time I realized I wasted precious time. I heard that being ‘clueless in Seattle’ is part of every doctoral trajectory, as long as it helped forging a scientist

with a broad knowledge spectrum. Looking back to that period, I can say that ‘the hard encounter’ with the management sciences helped questioning my assumptions I intuitively had on vulnerability. If my research would not have evolved, I would still be saying that vulnerability is a strength, without explaining when or why it is not the case. Getting more focus was not only reached by having delineated the topic, but also by adopting another writing style. While my theological background learned me to go wide, devoting a lot of energy to describe the context, often backed up by centuries of the scholarly thinking, the management sciences learned me to focus on a “slice of reality”, based upon recent data. Just like management scholars are afraid to look weak facing philosophically or theologically complex notions, theologians or philosophers have a peculiar way of dealing with data. Some treat data like a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (R. Otto): it scares them and appeals to them at the same time. Most of the time, they keep a safe distance in order not to be confronted or bothered with elements that offer less room for interpretation, like empirical data. The doctoral research taught me that my theological background gave me the confidence to zoom out, while this does not prevent me to zoom in based upon empirical data.

Synthesizing the previous period as seizing control over the focus and direction of my research, the doctoral course on qualitative research methods in business methods forced me to loosen the control without losing my focus or methodological rigor. Conducting qualitative research required that I open myself for the vulnerability that presents itself in everyday life. This everyday life representation of leader vulnerability forced me to accept a version of vulnerability that is more rebellious and stubborn than I hoped or planned for. All of the sudden, the respondents made it clear that my authenticity-preference was not always the corner stone of their story. I only realized how preoccupied I was with my own theoretical hopes and dreams when I started noticing my own disappointment when respondents pointed at other directions. I remember writing down: don’t wait too long to go to the field. Good qualitative research

requires in-depth knowledge of the existing theory, but only if it is used to better understand the narrative of the participants. Participants are not there to understand how you will so conveniently broaden the existing theory. So, it took time to rediscover some kind of vulnerability, namely not being in control and switching over to an open, attentive and accepting mind. That is perhaps the most valuable lesson I've learned: to really listen to what people have to say. I realize this is a pitfall for every qualitative scholar and I hope to gain confidence to also explore methods where I delegate more control. By experience and hopefully with confidence, I will achieve a fuller and broader "creative range of methods of data generation and data sources" (Mason, 2002, p. 25).

One of my promoters asked how I dealt with my own vulnerability during the interview. I did not feel very vulnerable at that moment. I do remember that I felt gratitude. I was thankful that people are willing to open their already busy schedule, are willing to trust me and tell me their stories, with ups and downs, doubts and fears, successes and failures. I learned so much, much more than I could ever imagine. Now that I teach, write or speak, I have an accumulated wisdom, being plugged in the leadership experiences of so many respondents.

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TABLE 1:
VULNERABILITY IN TRUST CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Reference	Vulnerability inclusion
Sable (1993), p. 1133.	“The mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit the other’s vulnerability”
Mayer et al. (1995), p. 712.	“The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party”.
Mishra & Morrissey (1990), p. 265.	“One party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is (a) competent, (b) open, (c) concerned, and (d) reliable”.
Zand (1972), p. 230.	“Actions that (a) increase one’s vulnerability, (b) to another whose behavior is not under one’s control, (c) in a situation in which the penalty (disutility) one suffers if the other abuses that vulnerability is greater than the benefit (utility) one gains if the other does not abuse that vulnerability”
Mishra, 1996, p. 266.	“Trust is one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the other party is competent, open, concerned, and reliable”.

Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 395.	“Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another”
Doney et al. 1998, p. 604.	“A willingness to rely on another party and to take action in circumstances where such action makes one vulnerable to the other party”
Serva et al., 2005, p. 626.	A shared belief by members of a focal group about how willing that group is to be vulnerable to the a target group
Barney & Hansen, 1994, p. 177.	Trust is “the mutual confidence that one’s vulnerability will not be exploited in an exchange”.
Michalos, 1990, p. 619.	“Trust as a relatively informed attitude or propensity to allow oneself and perhaps others to be vulnerable to harm in the interest of some perceived greater good”
Baier, 1985, p. 235.	Trust is “accepted vulnerability to another’s possible but not expected ill will (or lack of good will) toward one”

TABLE 2:
CODING SCHEMES

UMBRELLA CONSTRUCT	CONSTRUCT	CODES
Rise/origins of the vulnerability:	Lacking ska's or certain capabilities	13
	Making mistakes	22
	Unpredictability/uncontrollability	7
	Novice situation	8
	Harsh feedback	5
	Low or bad performance	6
Contextual determinants	Personality (4) gender (2) and age	6
	Psych safe environment	10
Felt vulnerability	Feeling weak	5
	Feeling doubtful and insecure	9
	Feeling powerless	4
	Feeling desperate	4
	Feeling uncomfortable	5
	Unspecified negative feeling	13
Displayed vulnerability	Apologizing	4
	Admitting or talking about one's mistakes	18
	Asking for help/voluntary feedback	9
	Discussing/clarifying org. problems	6
	Admitting lack of KSA's or capabilities	7
	Displaying insecurity	3

	Displaying emotions	9
	Voice	2
	Braking protocol	4
Positive outcomes:	Willingness to help	7
	Stronger relations	15
	Humanization of the leader	6
	Learning behavior	12

TABLE 3:
ESSENTIAL MARKERS IN THE VULNERABILITY DYNAMICS

PERSPECTIVE	VULNERABILITY MANIFESTATIONS	REALIZE?	TRANSFORM?	SHOW(N)?
SELF	UNRECOGNIZED	NO	NO	YES/NO
	VULNERABILITY			
	FELT	YES	NO	NO
	VULNERABILITY			
	DISPLAYED	YES	NO	YES
	VULNERABILITY A: (CLONED)			
	DISPLAYED	YES	YES	YES
OTHER	VULNERABILITY B: (TRANSFORMED)			
	PERCEIVED	YES/NO	NO	YES

FIGURE 1

PROCESS MODEL OF LEADER VULNERABILITY.

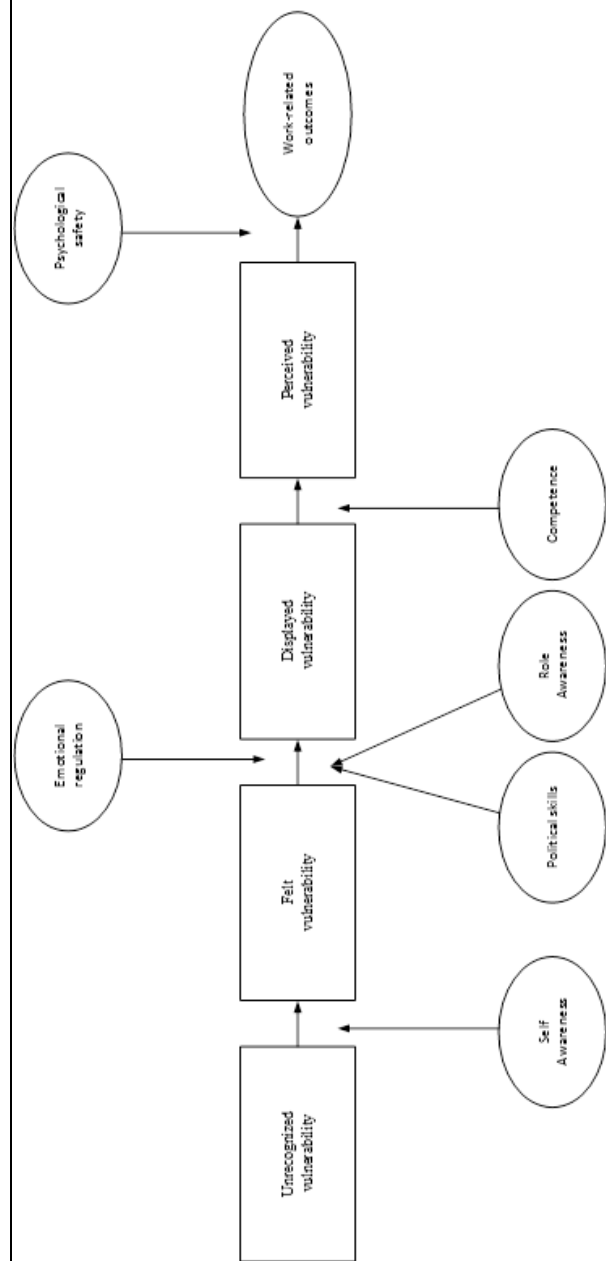
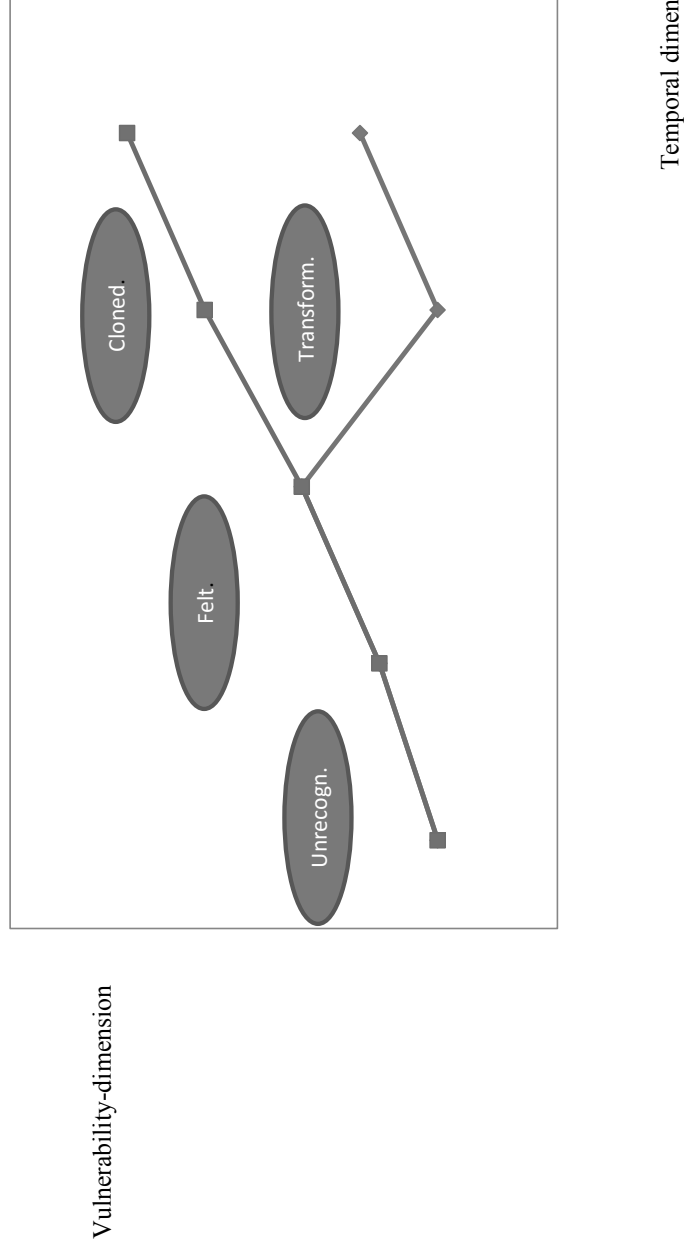


FIGURE 2

RISE AND DECLINE OF VULNERABILITY



APPENDIX

1. Global view analysis first dataset using NVIVO

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Find Now

Clear

Find In

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PDF Selection

Text

Region

Select

Find

Insert

Replace

Delete

ABC

Spelling

Proofing

Nodes

methodology/

respondenten

dataset 1 Italy CEO

dataset 2 Belgium Healthcare

Paris Consultants

Relationships

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Folders

Look for:

dataset 1 Italy CEO

dataset 1 Italy CEO

Name

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8

18

24

22

23

Sources

References

Created On

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Modified On

Modified By

siuerende informatie

32

23/04/2015 21:36

JC

19/06/2015 13:59

JC

revisit dataset 1 after coding dataset 2

11

14/10/2015 17:05

JC

23/10/2015 18:04

JC

infeidende informatie

21

8/05/2015 12:38

JC

19/06/2015 13:58

JC

beschrijven leiderschapstijl

39

23/04/2015 21:22

JC

26/06/2015 19:21

JC

afsluitende informatie

22

24/04/2015 9:40

JC

15/11/2015 19:33

JC

kwetsbaarheid

47

23/04/2015 21:22

JC

24/11/2015 18:47

JC

File Home Create External Data Analyze Query Explore Layout View Annotations See Also Links Relationships Links Framework Matrix Classification Report Node Matrix Detail View Previous Next Color Scheme Visualization

Dock All Undock All Close All Docked Bookmarks Close Navigation View Find Quick Coding View Workspace

Nodes

- Nodes
 - methodology
 - respondenten
 - dataset 1 Italy CEO
 - dataset 2 Belgium Healthcare
 - Peris Consultants
- Relationships
- Node Matrices

Sources

Nodes

Classifications

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Look for:

Search In dataset 1 Italy CE Find Now Clear Advanced Find

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
unrecognized	8	13	4/05/2015 22:47	JC	13/11/2015 19:34	JC
Proces	8	11	14/10/2015 17:06	JC	29/10/2015 15:56	JC
van unrecognized naar felt	0	0	20/10/2015 17:03	JC	20/10/2015 17:03	JC
self-awareness	3	7	26/10/2015 18:18	JC	15/11/2015 19:12	JC
boodschapper	4	4	2/05/2015 12:09	JC	21/07/2015 12:47	JC
tussen felt en displayed	0	0	20/10/2015 17:02	JC	26/10/2015 17:13	JC
solution-oriented (DEALING)	6	14	29/10/2015 16:03	JC	15/11/2015 17:32	JC
repair	2	2	2/05/2015 13:40	JC	21/07/2015 12:47	JC
problem-oriented	3	3	29/10/2015 16:02	JC	15/11/2015 19:52	JC
not show	0	0	6/11/2015 18:01	JC	6/11/2015 18:01	JC
authenticity	4	7	12/11/2015 10:49	JC	12/11/2015 11:10	JC
transformatie van de kwetsbaarheid	0	0	3/05/2015 11:32	JC	3/05/2015 11:32	JC
ik benut de kwetsbaarheid om bij te leren	1	1	3/05/2015 14:10	JC	3/05/2015 14:10	JC
gevoel van duidelijkheid en veiligheid geven als i	1	1	3/05/2015 13:40	JC	3/05/2015 13:40	JC
er is nu iets om samen aan te werken	2	2	3/05/2015 13:20	JC	21/06/2015 17:20	JC
eerlijkheid	2	2	3/05/2015 12:19	JC	3/05/2015 13:56	JC
Duidelijkheid	3	3	3/05/2015 12:19	JC	3/05/2015 13:56	JC
diminish or dissapearing of vulnerability	1	1	29/10/2015 17:23	JC	29/10/2015 17:23	JC
de oorzaak van de kwetsbaarheid wegnemen	3	3	3/05/2015 11:3	JC	015 15:20	JC

Microsoft Office Upload Center
Er zijn geen bestanden in behandeling om te worden geupload

File

Home

Create

Workspace

Navigation View

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Undock All

Close All

Docked

Bookmarks

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List View

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Classification

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respondenten

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dataset 2 Belgium Healthcare

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Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
<input checked="" type="radio"/> vierde analyse	0	0	16/11/2015 15:36	JC	16/11/2015 15:36	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> tips rond kwetsbaarheid door leiders	5	5	12/06/2015 16:49	JC	30/07/2015 14:57	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> sturende informatie respondent en organisatie	19	21	24/04/2015 9:37	JC	12/05/2015 21:07	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> proces en tijdsanalyse	0	0	12/05/2015 21:25	JC	12/05/2015 21:25	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> kwetsbaarheid vroegere analyse	26	27	24/04/2015 9:40	JC	23/11/2015 14:57	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> kwetsbaarheid tweede analyse	0	0	9/06/2015 13:20	JC	9/06/2015 13:20	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> kwetsbaarheid derde analyse	0	0	22/07/2015 7:00	JC	22/07/2015 7:00	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> inleidende informatie	3	3	11/05/2015 11:12	JC	11/05/2015 13:25	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> beschrijven leiderschapstijl	16	16	24/04/2015 9:40	JC	11/05/2015 13:40	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> afsluitende informatie	8	8	24/04/2015 9:40	JC	23/11/2015 14:57	JC

4. Detail of the analysis of second dataset using NVIVO

Navigation View

- ☒ Find
- ☒ Quick Coding
- ☐ Dock All
- ☐ Undock All
- ☐ Close All
- ☐ Docked
- ☐ Bookmarks
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- ☐ Zoom
- ☐ Layout
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- ☐ Window

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 - Paris Consultants
 - Relationships
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- Nodes
- Classifications
- Collections
- Queries
- Reports
- Models
- Folders

Look for: dataset 2 Belgium Healthcare

Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
<input type="radio"/> situerende informatie respondent en organisatie	19	21	24/04/2015 9:37	JC	12/05/2015 21:07	JC
<input type="radio"/> proces en tijdsanalyse	0	0	11/05/2015 21:25	JC	12/05/2015 21:25	JC
<input checked="" type="radio"/> professionele opdracht vervachting of verplijhting	1	4	11/05/2015 17:39	JC	11/05/2015 17:41	JC
<input type="radio"/> zorgen voor je team	2	4	11/05/2015 18:39	JC	12/06/2015 11:40	JC
<input type="radio"/> team verwacht heldere leidinggevende	1	1	11/05/2015 19:19	JC	11/05/2015 19:20	JC
<input type="radio"/> Ik moet het voorbeeld geven	1	1	28/05/2015 23:48	JC	28/05/2015 23:48	JC
<input type="radio"/> geen behoefte aan huidige leidinggevende	2	2	11/05/2015 19:17	JC	28/05/2015 23:49	JC
<input type="radio"/> care proces overschouwen en aansturen	2	2	11/05/2015 18:39	JC	12/06/2015 11:41	JC
<input type="radio"/> afwerken vele taken die liggen te wachten	1	1	12/05/2015 21:20	JC	12/05/2015 21:21	JC
<input type="radio"/> blockers or stimuli	10	12	9/06/2015 13:19	JC	23/11/2015 13:28	JC
<input type="radio"/> bijstellen of aanpassen van de eigen kwetsbaarheid	1	1	11/05/2015 18:57	JC	26/05/2015 16:08	JC
<input type="radio"/> uitbalanceren persoonlijke kwetsbaarheid en professioneel functi	1	3	27/05/2015 22:38	JC	17/11/2015 11:45	JC
<input type="radio"/> terug op positieven komen	1	1	16/06/2015 16:50	JC	22/07/2015 9:26	JC
<input type="radio"/> prioriteiten stellen in het proces	1	5	11/05/2015 18:58	JC	27/05/2015 22:10	JC
<input type="radio"/> knop omdraaien en op iets anders focussen	2	2	11/05/2015 19:16	JC	28/05/2015 23:50	JC
<input type="radio"/> eigen gevoelens onderschikken aan prioriteiten	1	1	11/05/2015 19:16	JC	12/05/2015 21:13	JC
<input type="radio"/> doseren display kwetsbaarheid	1	2	11/05/2015 19:13	JC	17/11/2015 11:45	JC
<input type="radio"/> kwetsbaarheid vroegere analyse	26	27	24/04/2015 9:40	JC	23/11/2015 14:57	JC
<input type="radio"/> kwetsbaarheid tweede analyse	0	0	9/06/2015 13:20	JC	9/06/2015 13:20	JC
<input type="radio"/> kwetsbaarheid derde analyse	0	0	22/07/2015 7:00	JC	22/07/2015 7:00	JC

5. Detail of the node classifications using NVIVO

Navigation View | Find | Quick Coding | Detail View | Workspace

External Data | Analyze | Query | Explore | Layout | View

☒ Dock All
☐ Undock All
☐ Close All

☐ Docked
☐ Bookmarks

☐ Annotations
☐ See Also Links
☐ Relationships

Classifications

- Source Classifications
- Node Classifications
- Relationship Types

Look for: [] Search In: [] Node Classification: [] Clear

Name	Type	Created On	Modified On	Modified By
tenure categories	Text	22/04/2015 13:06	JC	28/04/2015 11:32
number of followers	Text	22/04/2015 13:41	JC	29/04/2015 21:14
years in the company	Text	22/04/2015 13:42	JC	4/08/2015 17:35
leadership experience in years	Text	22/04/2015 13:44	JC	1/05/2015 15:18
exact lead exp in years	Integer	24/04/2015 9:12	JC	4/08/2015 17:35
function	Text	24/04/2015 9:14	JC	30/04/2015 0:36
exact study	Text	24/04/2015 9:57	JC	5/05/2015 12:10
company profit or non profit	Text	27/04/2015 17:25	JC	27/04/2015 17:25
company size	Text	27/04/2015 17:27	JC	27/04/2015 17:27
company sector	Text	27/04/2015 17:31	JC	27/04/2015 17:31
company national of international structured	Text	27/04/2015 17:31	JC	27/04/2015 18:14
company on national or international market	Text	27/04/2015 17:33	JC	27/04/2015 18:15
company size exact number employees	Integer	27/04/2015 17:34	JC	5/05/2015 12:00
sharing modus	Text	26/05/2015 16:26	JC	26/05/2015 16:26
presence or absence of vulnerability manifestations	Text	4/06/2015 22:03	JC	5/06/2015 12:19

Sources

- Nodes
- Classifications
- Collections
- Queries
- Reports
- Models
- Folders

6. Complete and detailed analysis of the coding

[illegible]

[illegible]

7. Sample description:

